This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

32101 064786716

Digitized by Google

3615
.5
.1891
v.1

PRINCETON, N. J.

7002

83 d 5
.1 + 2
2

ENGLISH EDITIONS OF BAGEHOT'S WORKS.

Biographical Studies.	8vo.	$4.00
Economic Studies.	8vo.	[illegible]

LIBRARY OF THE COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY.

Presented by

Traveler's Insurance Co.,

LONGMANS, GREEN & CO., London and New York.
(15 East 16th St., New York.)

Digitized by Google

COLLEGE LI...
JAN ... 04
PRINCETON, N. J.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Yours
Walter Bagehot

Digitized by Google

THE WORKS OF

WALTER BAGEHOT

M. A., AND FELLOW OF UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, LONDON

WITH MEMOIRS BY R. H. HUTTON

NOW FIRST PUBLISHED IN FULL

BY

The Travelers Insurance Company

OF HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

EDITED BY FORREST MORGAN

IN FIVE VOLUMES

VOL. I

Hartford

1891

Digitized by Google

Copyrighted, 1889, by
THE TRAVELERS INSURANCE COMPANY,
of Hartford, Conn.

Copyrighted, 1891, by THE TRAVELERS INSURANCE COMPANY.

Digitized by Google

CONTENTS OF VOL. I.

	PAGE
Editor's Preface	i
Memoir of Walter Bagehot, by R. H. Hutton (from "Literary Studies")	xxv
Bagehot as an Economist, by Robert Giffen (*Fortnightly Review*, April 1, 1880)	lxiii
Extracts from article on Oxford (*Prospective Review*, October, 1852)	lxxxv
List of Alterations	xcv

LITERARY STUDIES.

The First Edinburgh Reviewers (*National Review*, October, 1825)	1
Hartley Coleridge (*Prospective Review*, October, 1852)	45
Percy Bysshe Shelley (*National Review*, October, 1856)	81
Béranger (*National Review*, October, 1857)	135
Mr. Clough's Poems (*National Review*, October, 1862)	175
Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning; or, Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque Art in English Poetry (*National Review*, November, 1864)	200
Shakespeare — the Man (*Prospective Review*, July, 1853)	255
John Milton (*National Review*, July, 1859)	303
Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (*National Review*, January, 1862)	352
William Cowper (*National Review*, July, 1855)	387
Appendix (Translations)	447

(RECAP)
3615
.5
1891
1.1

92101

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

EDITOR'S PREFACE.

THIS EDITION was planned and begun as a simple reprint, uniform and indexed, of the existing editions of Bagehot's works;* there was then no thought of "editing" the text, or recognition of its extreme necessity. The accidental notice, after the work was well under way, that a series of extracts from a familiar book were full of errors, led first to an attempt to verify and correct all quotations; then, as attention was more sharply directed to the text, to the discovery that Bagehot's own matter was in almost as corrupt a state as his extracts from other writers, and in consequence to still further examination of the original sources of his facts, — which resulted in some surprising developments; lastly, to a collation of his original review articles with the reprints revised by himself, — a not unfruitful task. Had the enormous labor involved, and the utter impossibility of fully accomplishing the design, been realized at the outset (for it needed several years of exclusive time, while only the spare moments of a couple of busy years could be given

* Namely, the two volumes of "Literary Studies" and the volume of "Biographical Studies" (including the "Letters on the French Coup d'État"), and the unfinished "Economic Studies," edited by his friend and schoolfellow, Mr. Hutton; and the scattered volumes "English Constitution," "Physics and Politics," "Lombard Street," "Depreciation of Silver," and "International Coinage" (from the *Economist* of 1868, as the first reprinted edition was unobtainable and the second had not been issued; the latter is used in the present set). To this edition are added also the obituary article on John Stuart Mill from the *Economist*, to fill a gap in the "Economic Studies"; Mr. Hutton's memoir in the National Cyclopædia; and copious extracts from a very uneven article on "Oxford" in the *Prospective Review*. Mr. Hutton judiciously omitted this essay from his collection, — as a whole it is not only obsolete, but (an unknown thing in Bagehot's later writings) rather tedious; yet it contains in spots so much of his very best wit and acute sense that it seemed a wrong both to him and the public to suppress it entirely. Especially good are the passages on the use and influence of the higher education (though even this has another side which he neglects); and the closing one on the smoldering fury of hate in the English mind toward anything papistic, — as racy and characteristic a bit as anything he ever wrote. — ED.

Digitized by Google

to it, and many mortifying gaps were inevitable), the plan would probably have been confined to its original proportions; but I believe that even a partial success will be welcomed by the public, for no modern writer needed the service so badly, and there was no likelihood of its being undertaken by another.

No one who does not — as probably no one save a possible future editor ever will — compare this edition, word by word, with any former ones, can form any adequate conception of the shocking state of Bagehot's text as heretofore given to the world; there is nothing even remotely approaching it in the case of any other English writer of high rank since Shakespeare's time. This reflects no discredit on Mr. Hutton, who simply left it as he found it, and who shows in his memoir of Bagehot that he knew it was not in very good shape, — though apparently he did not realize how bad it was; but I think it does reflect a good deal on Bagehot, who could have saved the worst things by the most casual glance at his proofs, and who evidently never even looked at most of them at all. These slips cover almost the entire possible range of human blunders, and are sometimes of serious moment.

Perhaps the most numerous sort resulted from misreading by the printers of Bagehot's not very legible handwriting, perpetuated by his failure to correct them. Through this, some of the review articles are perfect museums of grotesque errors. Names of persons and places suffer badly: Horner masquerades as Hume,* Croker as Crocker, and Daniel Malthus as David; Wortley Montagu's country seat of Sandon appears as Loudon, and Lady Althorp's home, Wiseton, as Winton; and so on. In Horace Walpole's stinging letter on Mary Wortley Montagu, "dirt" is changed to "art"; in one of Francis Horner, "success" is made "sweep"; in an extract from "Eōthen," "command" is printed "commerce"; in an extract from Wordsworth in the sketch of Crabb Robinson, "Of nature's impress" is turned to "A nation's impress"; and so on *ad tedium*, — in most cases the new reading being perfect gibberish. Diverting examples of this are near the beginning of "Physics and Politics," and the last page but one of the "Letters on the French Coup d'Êtat," where the printers had serious and unsuccessful struggles to keep "politics" and "polities" separate, and the author seems not to have helped them at all. But nothing in printed literature is quite as ridiculous as the extract from the "Prelude" in the essay on Lord Althorp, which I have embalmed for a wondering world. This article, published about the

* The exact places of these mistakes can be easily found by the index.

Digitized by Google

time of Bagehot's death, is in a little the worst condition of all; but that on Mary Wortley Montagu is not much better. Nor is this by any means confined to extracts: the foot-notes will show more than one case where the sense of his own writing is destroyed by a misread word whose correct reading is easy to guess. In this list belong also a mass of mere typographical errors and slips of the pen (as George III. for George I., Queen Anne for George II., etc.), sometimes of a most annoying kind; for instance, in two cases a misprinted date caused a long search for a quotation in the wrong quarter.

Another remarkable and curiously balanced sort consists in the misplacement of quotation marks, either crediting Bagehot with the writing of others or *vice versa;* there are, I think, just the same number of each. For instance, a half-page of Lady Louisa Stuart's is printed as his own in the article on Mary Wortley Montagu; a half-page of Lord Mahon in that on William Pitt; several lines of Lord Macaulay in "Lombard Street" (mangled as usual); and there are one or two more. On the other hand, he partially requites Lady Louisa with a couple of lines, and gives some to Le Marchant in the sketch of Lord Althorp and to Catlin in "Economic Studies," and there are other instances.

Again, the number of cases where the sense is exactly inverted by the misplacement of negatives or the reversal of the place of alternatives in a sentence is something incredible; I have kept no exact account, but there must be well toward twenty in the five volumes. A few of these have been changed outright (and noted in the table of alterations); but in general, attention has been called to them in foot-notes.

The department of distorted quotations is recruited from so many different sources of error that it is hard to know where to begin. Of course inevitable lapses of memory are the chief cause for the corrupt state of minor quotations and anecdotes. No miscellaneous writer can possibly go back to all his original sources to verify his "points,"—it would take a lifetime to write a volume in any such way. The maxim of the proof-room is, that quotations are always to be assumed as wrong; and it is curious how seldom the fact is otherwise. And very likely Bagehot's memory seems to me to have worked with more than usual crookedness because I have not had occasion to explore the maze of any other man's; but it seems impossible that any one else can ever have remembered so many non-existent things, or so often wrongly accredited his quotations or introduced them with total irrelevance to the context. The list of these is long, but I will not

Digitized by Google

even attempt to cite them. I should perhaps add to this list a favorite performance of his which is quite as exasperating to an editor as the worst of the others, — citing passages from a first edition which were expunged in later ones, but without hinting at such effacement; this trick in the cases of Mackintosh, Montalembert, and Gibbon, cost several days of wasted time.

But the abominably corrupt state of his longer quotations — some of which are simply miracles of mangling, and much the greater part of which are more or less misquoted — cannot be accounted for by bad memory; for it can hardly be supposed that he trusted solely to his memory for whole pages. I can only guess at the *modus operandi:* but my guess is, that he copied his extracts by scribbling off the catch-words, trusting to his memory to fill out the skeleton when he prepared his copy for the press, and never comparing the outline with the original (thus often leaving out words, phrases, and occasionally even whole lines); that as might be expected, his memory was treacherous when the time came to write out his extracts in full; that (which is certain) the printers made mistakes in his copy, and he did not correct them; and as a result (which is most certain of all), that his quoted matter cannot be matched in the language for (sometimes absurd) divergence from the original.

It would seem at first thought that there would be no trouble in dealing with these things, — that the only thing necessary was to restore the true text, if it could be found, and there all difficulty ended; but in fact it has not been at all easy to decide in every case what to do, and I am by no means sure I have invariably made the best decision. Many of the alleged quotations could not be found at all, even when every attainable scrap of an author's published works or words was at hand. In some of these cases I can definitely prove that they have no existence, and sometimes can even show what he manufactured his "quotation" out of; but in far the greater number (and a list of the undiscoverable things which seem to lie easily at hand, and which I supposed to do so till after thorough and fruitless search, would excite surprise) I can only conjecture that he has credited them to the wrong authors, and have either passed them silently or transferred the problem to the reader by a foot-note. Sometimes it is a "made-up" quotation, — a fiction founded on fact, so to speak (there are instances of this in the articles on Sterne and Pitt, and elsewhere); sometimes the "quotation" gives the general sense of the original, but in a totally different form of words: in both these cases foot-notes are the obvious propriety. But between the latter and the ones so

Digitized by Google

slightly blundered as to involve only silent correction, there lie every grade of mangling, — a border-land where judgment is difficult, and I have sometimes substituted a correct form where another might have left the corrupt form standing and annotated it; I can only say that in no case of the sort have I tampered with Bagehot's own words, and in nearly every one I have called attention to the great difference of the correct quotation from Bagehot's text.

That the source of every quotation has been given whenever possible, follows of course. Apart from the question of accuracy, a reader of any author has a right to know this, in order to examine the context and follow the author in his track of reading; and judging from my own experience, no other service in editing save the explanation of obscure allusions is comparable to this, nor any lack an equal hindrance and exasperation. For the same reason, I have indicated where it was feasible the main sources whence he drew the facts for his review articles, and that of many special biographic or historical items. My object has been, to make the volumes as handily useful to the least scholarly reader as might be; I have assumed that many would be glad to use the articles as a base for some further reading if it was made easy, who could not or would not engage in any research requiring much time.

It would be ungrateful not to mention here the two assistants who have lightened my work and added to its value in its later stages. During the last few months of 1888 Miss T. J. O'Connell did much capable and faithful searching at the British Museum; but my chief debt is to Miss Fanny G. Darrow of Boston, who ransacked libraries in behalf of the work for a year, and without whose zeal, patience, and book-lover's "nose" for the probable place of extracts, the measure of its merits would have fallen far below what it is.

I come next to a most delicate subject, on which I have risked much vituperation; namely, my dealings with the murdered grammar and impossible syntax with which all Bagehot's writings abound. No writer of eminence in modern times (so far as I know) has treated so defiantly the primary grammatical rules of the English language, or the first principles of construction in any language. He was a business man, and he is an adept at "business talk" as frequently heard among that class of men, — perfectly lucid as to matter and perfectly incoherent as to structure, utterances which no man can mistake and no man can parse. There are sentences in his works which are no more English than they are Chinese, and yet are not in the least indistinct as to

Digitized by Google

meaning; indeed, Mr. Giffen says he sometimes wrote bad grammar purposely to make his meaning clearer, which is a startling proposition. He must have known the difference between a principal and a subordinate clause, but he put the knowledge to no practical use. His moods are kept pretty well in hand; but his tenses are at the mercy of fate and chance, and some of his paragraphs are perfect see-saws of past and present, mixed with the wildest indifference not only to grammar but to sense. His verbs have no certainty of agreeing with his nouns in number and person; his personal pronouns are as defiant of the trammels of singular and plural relations as his verbs are of the fetters of tense; and his relatives may or may not refer to the noun they follow.

That no editor has any business to rewrite a line or change a substantive word of his author's text is self-evident; and that the substitution of any language of mine for that of Walter Bagehot would be the summit of impertinence and presumptuous folly is equally evident. What readers wish to know and have a right to know is, what Bagehot said, not what his editor thinks he ought to have said. Therefore, in no case have I meddled with the structure of a sentence in any way; in a few cases I have called attention to the entanglement of the syntax, but I have not even attempted to mend such atrocities as "The period at which the likeness was attempted to be taken" (beginning of the "English Constitution"), or other like gems of English. But I do not think even editorial fidelity or reverence for the memory of a great man (and I cannot better gauge my own for Walter Bagehot than by saying that I believe this edition is a higher service to the public than any original work I could do) binds me to allow a plural noun to remain coupled with a singular verb (or *vice versa*), or a singular pronoun in one clause set off against a plural one in the following like clause, or a present and a past tense similarly yoked together in a most discordant union, — merely because the great man did not read his proofs and a patent slip of the pen remained uncorrected. I do not believe even he, little as he cared for such things, would wish to have all the rags and tatters of his haste and slovenliness scrupulously saved up and exhibited to posterity, any more than a public speaker would care to have a phonograph record an accidental hiccough; nor do I believe that even the most devoted admirers of Bagehot, to whom every word is worth preserving as instinct with the flavor of that rich mind (among whom I count myself), care to have their senses jarred upon by such purely accidental slips. Nevertheless, I recognize the right of the public to know just what their author wrote and how he

Digitized by Google

left his text; that he wrote carelessly and did not read his proofs is in itself an item of interest in comprehending him. And still more, I owe both to them and to myself to give the minutest information just how far I have tampered with the text, so that they may not fear that they are reading a mangled and wantonly altered version, and I may not be suspected of meddling with his language. I have therefore kept a scrupulous account of all the changes, even the minutest, (except such as are made by the insertion of words or letters, — in which case the additions are invariably put in brackets, — or by foot-notes,) and give them in a separate table. By this means, any one who finds comfort in knowing how badly his author could write can do so, and where no notice is given may be sure he is reading Bagehot undefiled.

That all extracts in foreign languages are translated, ought to be more a matter of course than it is: in anything designed for wide popular reading, neglect to do so is either laziness or swagger. The object being that all readers shall have the fullest understanding and enjoyment with the least friction, it is absurd to lock up any portion out of the reach of four-fifths of them; and it is not the business either of a writer or an editor to impose penalties for defective education. There is of course one palpable exception to this, — where an extract is cited as a sample of style instead of matter; which in general excludes translation of all poetry as well as of some prose. But curiously enough, not a single quotation of Bagehot's from any foreign author is given to illustrate style: even the verses from Sophocles in the essay on Shelley are cited only as an instance of classic bareness of decoration, and he quotes poems from Béranger only to illustrate that poet's philosophy of life. The worst translation possible, therefore, would be better than none; while in fact Mr. Walter Learned has graced this edition with several excellent translations of Béranger (some of which I think much the finest of any yet executed), and for the others I have taken the best I could find.

The foot-notes marked "B." are Bagehot's; those of Mr. Hutton are marked "R. H. H."; my own are signed "Ed." The latter is only added, however, to controversial or corrective notes; simple references to sources of quotations are left uncredited, though all but a very few are new to this edition, and some of the very few in previous ones are either wrong or unintelligible. By the latter I mean page references, which are the most exasperating of traps, since one is never sure of having the same edition as that cited, and the page number simply confuses him on any other. For this reason I have avoided them rigorously, and made references to

Digitized by Google

volume and chapter almost wholly; the few page references given are to standard and always accessible editions like Bohn, or to books where only one edition has been issued. It will be noticed that I have refrained almost wholly from argumentative notes; even the few which seem such turn really upon questions of fact. It is a gross wrong to an author to make his popularity float criticism of himself which could not gain a hearing if published separately, in such intimate union with the text that it cannot be escaped; and nothing is more annoying to a reader than to be incessantly teased with the information that the editor, for whom he does not care, differs from the author, for whom he does care. There are scores of points on which I think Bagehot's opinion could be contested or limited, some of them provoking in their perversity; but I have not forced the reader even to take the trouble of skipping an argument on the subject.

It ought not to be necessary, but to some it will be, to disclaim any overweening notion of the value of these or any corrections. Of course Bagehot's greatness is not affected by such trifles: his thought and his wit, the value of his matter and the charm of his style, did not have to wait for this before delighting the world, and so far as either the use or the pleasure of his works is concerned, they would be substantially as well without it. But then, the same thing may be said of every other great author, whom nevertheless it is always thought a worthy service to present in as fair and clear a shape as possible. Such work is, to use a familiar comparison, only "picking vermin off a lion's skin"; but for my own part I prefer a clean lion to a dirty one, and must not be accused of forgetting that he is a lion because I perform the service thoroughly, — on the contrary, but for my hearty admiration for him it would not have been undertaken. Once for all, Walter Bagehot's writings have been to me for many years one of the choicest of intellectual luxuries, and a valued store of sound thought and mental stimulation, and full appreciation of these must be held as implied in any difference of opinion I express; but even an admired master and teacher is not an idol to be uncritically worshiped.

Lastly, despite all the care and labor expended on the work, I know well that blunders will probably be found in it by sharp-eyed specialists, each with more time for a few items than the editor has had for the whole. Very likely they will vindicate Bagehot's accuracy on some points; not impossibly I have made some fresh errors in trying to correct his. I cannot escape or forestall such criticism, and would not if I could, — the public is entitled to

Digitized by Google

know the truth on every point; nor shall I complain of any just castigation for errors or bad judgment. I ask only for the fair allowance due to one who has made heavy personal sacrifices of leisure, health, and chosen pursuits, to carry through an important work which better equipped and less burdened men were not likely to undertake.

The appreciative essays on Bagehot published since his death — Mr. Hutton's memoirs, Mr. Giffen's reminiscences in the *Fortnightly*, the acute comments of Profs. Walker and Dicey in the *Nation*, and others — have so fully set forth his titles to praise, that further comment involves an awkward dilemma. To repeat the eulogies would be tedious; yet to give nothing but hostile criticism would grossly distort the perspective both of Bagehot and myself, and stultify both my admiration and my work. The hasty reader might think, "If Bagehot is wrong in both his attitude and his arguments, it is a waste of time to read him, and he cannot deserve so much laudation." Of course this would be bad reasoning even if the postulate were wholly true: like all first-rate minds, Bagehot is more instructive and better worth reading when he is wrong than when he is right, because the wrong is sure to be almost right and the truth on its side neglected; and for myself, I take refuge in his own dictum that it is not a critic's business to be thankful. But of course it is only true to a petty degree: a few debatable points do not exhaust the measure of his merits.

It will seem absurd to compare Bagehot with Coleridge, and there certainly was little enough resemblance in life or writings; but the chief work of both was the same, — to uproot the stubborn idea that nothing except what one is used to has any "case." Bagehot harps upon the fact that everything has a case; that institutions and practices are tools to do certain work vital to a society, and cannot be passed upon till we know its needs; and that those needs may demand alternate acceptance and rejection of given institutions, according as discipline is paralyzing progress or progress weakening discipline. He carries this to the very root, evidently taking keen pleasure in making out an excellent case for isolation, for persecution, for slavery, for state regulation of everything from religion to prices, for even the most paralyzing politico-religious despotism, — in short, for everything most hateful to the modern spirit and most mischievous in modern society; he makes it an arguable point whether his own arguments for toleration should be tolerated; he leaves prejudice in favor of any institution in the abstract not a leg to stand on. As a principle of immediate

Digitized by Google

political action, Mr. Hutton is unquestionably right in thinking this teaching worse than useless; but as a piece of analysis to clarify the minds of the intellectual class in the study of events and institutions, to sober sectarian zeal and infuse caution into the framers of political elysiums, its value can hardly be overrated.

"Physics and Politics," of which the above is the vital essence, seems to me his masterpiece, and not even yet rated at its true value. Both its size and its style, though important merits, are drawbacks to its gaining reverence; men will not believe that so small a book can be a great reservoir of new truth, or that one so easy to understand can be a great work of science. Yet after subtracting all its heavy debt to Darwin and Wallace, Spencer and Maine, Tylor and Lubbock, and all the other scientific and institutional research of his day, it remains one of the few epoch-making books of the century: the perspective of time may perhaps leave this and the "Origin of Species" standing out as having given us clearest knowledge of the springs of change and progress in the world, — this doing for human society what that did for organic life. No other writer had shown us that the early world was one where, so to say, water ran up-hill and parallel lines always met, where freedom was ruinous and persecution vital, the caste system and slavery immense advances and blessings, belief in omens a spring of progress, and hierarchies of "medicine men" the nurseries of all intellectual advancement. And in one respect Bagehot's work, though inspired by the other, is the more striking, — it is so short. It is hardly more than a pamphlet, — one can read it in an evening: yet it contains a mass of ideas which could be instructively expanded into many volumes; and I do not know of any work which is a master-key to so many locks, and supplies the formula for so many knotty historical problems. Most important is the terrible clearness with which he brings out the lack of any necessary connection between the interests of the individual and those of the society (that is, the individuals of the future), and their direct antagonism often for ages; this fact alone is the source of half the tragedy of the world. But it makes the book a profoundly saddening one, as anything must be which recalls the infinite helplessness of human endeavor against the mighty forces of whose orbits we can hardly see the curve in thousands of years; one must have little imagination not to be impressed by it as by a great melancholy epic. It shows also (though Bagehot evidently did not perceive it) that "the fools being in the right" and the intelligent thought of a society wrong half the time results from natural law, — from the fact that ultimate benefit through the

Digitized by Google

strengthening of the society involves vast immediate evils, the popular instinct feeling only the former and the cultivated thought perceiving only the latter; and consequently disproves his own political creed that a democratic government cannot be as good as a "deferential" one. In fact, that theory dissolves into a tissue of fallacies and verbal quibbles as soon as one begins to analyze it.

The leading theories of the book are obviously true. The two great factors, imitation and persecution, though on the surface exactly opposed, spring in fact from a single root, the pride of personality, the result of the very fact of conscious existence. Imitation is the attempt of an individual to raise itself to the state of another: supposed inferiors are not imitated. Persecution is nature's protest against unstable equilibrium, and effort to make it stable; that is, to bar from an individual's knowledge everything inconsistent with the permanency of its immediate state of feeling, in order to avoid possible discovery that its principles of action are false, — in a word, injuries to its pride. Hence, the intensity of the desire or of its action does not and cannot diminish, — it is as strong now in the most civilized societies as it was in the Stone Age. The only amelioration is, that to an ever greater extent a flux of details is found to involve none of guiding principles, and to be a *sine qua non* of needful business; so more and more of them are reluctantly left to free choice. But how hateful this tolerance is to men's hearts, how spontaneous the impulse of persecution (or, less harshly, enforcing conformity), how gladly they set up some standard (it does not much matter what) in the pettiest things and force every one to act *alike*, is manifest wherever there is power either to coerce others or to get away from them. Parents will not let a child prepare its food in its own way, even when it would do no harm; men will hoot another for wearing a suit whose color is (for no assignable cause) held inappropriate to the season; and the tyranny of fashion among women (who simply represent the conservative forces at their strongest) needs no exposition. "Society" is ruled by codes more microscopic, despotic, and inflexible than any ever enforced on savages: the clothes to be worn, the ceremonies to be performed, the manner of eating, the minutest details of conduct, are prescribed without latitude or appeal. The same feeling makes people shun like the plague the risk of discovering new truth on the main theories of life, as politics and religion: men choose their associates, their newspapers, their very societies of intellectual research, to reinforce their confidence in themselves, not to shake it. Life would not be endurable if one never felt sure from day to day whether the postulates on which he based his conduct were true. Even the

Digitized by Google

principle of corporate liability for offenses to the gods, to which Bagehot assigns the largest share in enforcing unity of action, must have found its chief scope through this; for things directly esteemed unlucky from special events (absurdly numerous as they seem to us) can have borne but a small proportion to the mass of neutral acts, which must have been organized into a systematic drill through the fact that anything disagreeable (or what is the same thing, unfamiliar) to themselves was of course assumed disagreeable to their gods too, and soon came under a permanent religious ban. I am inclined also to think that his theory of the way the "cake of custom" came to be broken is more ingenious than valid: the progress of the world cannot have been left to the pure accident of a special polity. It is much more likely that it resulted from the simultaneous growth of knowledge, cupidity, and business necessity, — through the mixture of peoples, conquest, and commerce, — and would have occurred if the "chief, old men, and multitude" system had never grown up. Here as elsewhere the influence of old prepossessions is very visible: aristocracy having in fact existed in all progressive societies, it is assumed that but for its rise the world could never have emerged from savagery — which is incredible.

The economic worth or novelty of "Economic Studies" I am not competent to estimate; but that feature is not to me its chief interest, and I doubt if it is its chief value, which is rather historic and social. The book is mainly a re-survey of the ground traversed in "Physics and Politics," with which it is identical in aim in a more limited sphere, — to prove that modern advantages were ancient ruin, and modern axioms ancient untruths. It buttresses the same points with many new illustrations and expositions; and contains besides a mass of the nicest and shrewdest observations on modern trade and society, full of truth and suggestiveness. That it was left a fragment is a very great loss to the world; had it been finished, Mr. Giffen's account of his discussions with his colleague gives us reason to believe that it would have touched on all the moral elements in trade which so deflect men from the line of mere pecuniary interest.

Regarding the "English Constitution," appreciation of its immense merits must be taken for granted; praising it is as superfluous as praising Shakespeare. Every student knows that it has revolutionized the fashion of writing on its subject, that its classifications of governments are accepted commonplaces, that it is the leading authority in its own field and a valued store of general political thought. As an analysis of the English system and an

Digitized by Google

essay on comparative constitutions, it will not lose its value; as a treatise on the best form of constitution and a manual of advice for foreigners, it is a monument of the futility of such work, for the course of events since his death seems sardonically designed for the express purpose of making a wreck of it. The last decade has done more than the previous four to compel a total recasting of much political speculation based at once on long experience and seemingly unassailable theory. In this country some apparent axioms, further confirmed by the test of ninety years, have been upset by that of a hundred; in France, recent history has justified Bagehot's theory as a philosopher by stultifying his conclusions as an Englishman, and proving his governmental prescription to be quackery as a panacea; in his own country some of the leaders of thought are looking wistfully toward the conservatism of our system as an improvement on the unfettered democracy of theirs,—an ironical commentary on his book. These changes, too, are of the most opposite sorts, as might be expected, —the characteristic evils of each system developing until they become well-nigh intolerable and demand an infusion of the other for a remedy. In this country we need some elements at least of the cabinet system, for the sake of political education, party responsibility, direct executive power, and the ability to prevent the creation of a permanent oligarchy through the interests and fears of an army of office-holders. In France there is evident need of an executive with power to carry on the government for a certain time in defiance of faction. In England the question is so bound up with the tremendous problems now at hand, and these are so involved and far-reaching, that reserve of judgment is both modesty and common-sense; but the difference in the situation from that of a few years ago is so great that the rather complacent tone of the book already grates on one as being decidedly out of place, and even gives it an unjust appearance of shallowness. Part of the change had come before his death: the difference in tone between the first edition and the introduction to the second is nearly as great as between the views of trade given by a merchant when prospering and when menaced with bankruptcy.

And this leads naturally to his utterances on American subjects. These were in general so fair, often so weighty and valuable, and always so different in kind from the ignorant ill-will toward anything foreign in which every national press is steeped, that we can feel no irritation even where his judgment is most severe. Besides, he confined his criticisms mainly to positive institutions, which can be modified at will; and did little carping at

Digitized by Google

social facts, which is scarcely more than a waste of breath even from a native and quite that from a foreigner, — such facts not being conscious creations but instinctive embodiments of social necessities, which adjust themselves as needed and which their very creators are powerless to change. It would be silly, therefore, to resent the little streaks of complacent John-Bullism which lurked even in that least insular of minds; but I confess to a touch of malicious satisfaction in this proof that he was human and an Englishman. Of this sort is the remark, in the most permanently delicious passage he ever wrote (that on early reading in the essay on Gibbon), "Catch an American of thirty; tell him about the battle of Marathon," etc. What he supposed the historical teaching in American colleges* to consist of, it is impossible to say; apparently, analyses of the battle of New Orleans, and panegyrics on Sam Houston and Davy Crockett. But all literature may be challenged to furnish anything equal in absurdity to the grave deliverance in "Physics and Politics," that "A Shelley in New England could hardly have lived, *and a race of Shelleys would have been impossible.*" Shelley would have been no whit more out of key with the community than were Alcott and Thoreau, and he could not well have received less sympathy here than he did at home; and in what quarter or epoch of the world since the Silurian age "a race of Shelleys" would have been possible, defies imagination, — it certainly was not England in 1800+. It is hard to believe that Bagehot did not have some intelligible thought in writing this piece of pinchbeck profundity, but I cannot form the least idea what.

These of course are trifles; but in both the great aspects of our system, the political and the social, he omits or mistakes essential facts. To be sure, in the social aspect he bases a gloomy view of the future on a much too complimentary view of the present; but it must have struck so impartial a seeker after truth as a *very* remarkable and gratifying coincidence, that both the political and the social system of his own country should be the best in the world, not only for present happiness but for future elevation.

First, politically. The "English Constitution" is ostensibly not a brief for that system, but a judicial work on comparative constitutions; and from such a standpoint it is a serious flaw that he

*Of course comparisons of this sort must be made between like classes: it is absurd to contrast the educated few of one country with the rough mass of another, and I doubt if the bulk of Yorkshire farmers or Lancashire mill-hands would find any magic in the name of Miltiades or Leonidas.

Digitized by Google

ignores wholly the factor of stability, to which everywhere else he attaches supreme value. All progress and even good government must be sacrificed if necessary to keep the political fabric together, is the entire *raison d'être* of the "Letters on the Coup d'État"; if a government cannot keep itself alive, it makes no difference how good it is. Much of "Physics and Politics" and "Economic Studies" rests on the same thesis: unity of action is of such prime importance to the world that a disciplined band of semi-barbarians often crushes out an advanced but loose-knit society; the same idea recurs again and again in his other writings. Yet when he contrasts the English with the American system, national feeling triumphs over abstract philosophy, with the result of exactly reversing the relations of the two systems. The evident fact is, that the nominal aristocracy of England is really an unchecked democracy, committing the fate of the polity at every moment, through the cabinet system and the lack of a written constitution, to the crude emotions of the mass; while the nominal democracy of America is so curbed by its written Constitution and fixed executive terms, accessory institutions, and the division of power between national, State, and municipal bodies, that its working is even ultra-conservative. Nor is it true, as he was wont to argue in the *Economist*, that such barriers are only useless irritations, and are always broken through as soon as the people are really excited. The failure of Johnson's impeachment is one proof to the contrary; and though the Supreme Court could be swamped and packed, that process cannot be indefinitely repeated. On the whole, the curbs curb, — and a good deal too much; for I must not be understood as objecting much to what he says, but only to what he does not say. His positive criticisms are mainly of the highest value and justice, and the severest ones are the truest. The dangers and degradations and follies, the scanting of decent political thought and the outlawry of independent political thinkers, the riot of low minds and coarse natures in authority for which they have no fitness, the lowering into the mud of the standards of political cleanliness, inevitable to such a polity, are so far from being overstated that his expressions are tame beside the facts. My contention is, that every point he makes in favor of the English system — and his arguments are of immense weight and often unanswerable — is an equal point in favor of pure democracy and against his own distrust of the people, by showing that the freer they are left to their own will the better they manage. Nothing can be truer than that a cabinet system keeps the political education of the masses at the highest pitch, and that one like

Digitized by Google

ours injuriously stints it. But thoroughness of political education results from directness of political power; and while a champion of democracy is perfectly consistent in thinking this an advantage and favoring cabinet government, its advocacy by Bagehot on that express ground presents the grotesque spectacle of a great thinker employing his best powers in confuting his own creed. And it is certainly not proved that the hard and fast line he draws between the two systems is inevitable: that free countries are shut down forever to a choice between two evils, neither of which can be lessened; that they must take either a pure cabinet system, with the throttle valve always under the hand of the mob, or a pure presidential system, with irresistible party power yet no party responsibility, little direct power of the executive for good and limitless indirect power for mischief, and the bread of many thousands of families at once a bribe and a threat to turn elections into a farce. I believe that the two can be made in some measure to work together; and if either finally absorbed the other, it would be the surest possible proof that the survivor was best fitted to the needs of the country.

His theory of the social effects of democracy is wildly imaginary, and very diverting to an American. He actually assumes that the theory of democratic social equality is realized as a fact, and that bootblacks and porters are the social equals (or at least think themselves so and act as if they were) of the rich and the "old families"; and bases on this assumption a highly complacent thesis of the great superiority of English society, as one of "removable inequalities," which is one of the most elaborately absurd pieces of social speculation ever published. In the first place, his facts are all wrong. Social equality is a chimera anyway, and in few sections of the earth is there less either of the practice or the theory than in the older cities of the United States. As to the practice, nowhere do a larger part of the people devote more of their faculties, from youth to old age, with strenuous energy and anxious care, to the sole task of preventing other people from associating with them, — their successes and failures in this useful vocation make no small part of the fun of the numerous comic papers; society is stratified by money, family connections, and occupation, here as everywhere, and England itself cannot surpass the minuteness of gradations and the subtlety of distinctions. As to the theory, not only is it practically absent from current talk or thought (except as an occasional inspiration to quell an English tourist), but I do not believe any other literature has so large a body of writing of all forms — essays, novels, plays, etc. — devoted

Digitized by Google

to a conscious propaganda of the snob theory of life in all its details, as America can show in the last two decades, — employing every weapon from direct argument to spiteful sneers and calm assumption, and in every tone from light ridicule to rancorous bitterness. The reaction from the earlier democratic theories has been even violent: in the perception that the equality so coveted and eulogized is neither possible nor best, a host of writers revel in kicking and insulting it, and glorifying the opposite and worse extreme which does not recognize personal qualities as a factor in social estimates at all. After reading some novels of the past few years, one thinks of the Jacobin Clubs of 1794 with a kindlier feeling. These writers are by no means consistent in detail, — part of them urging that the common herd may perhaps make something of their successors by tearful self-abasement of themselves, while others denounce them for wishing to be better than God made them, and for not making servant-girls of their daughters; and the same author sometimes implying in one work that wealth without grandfathers is naught, and in another that the Admirable Crichton himself without a large fortune would not be a proper *parti:* but they have one common aim, — to teach that the first duty of all who would be socially saved is to despise and avoid as large a part of the human race as possible. A society like this is in no lack of inequalities of any sort to furnish a stimulus to struggle, an incentive to every sort of ambition from the basest to the noblest, a motive to acquire everything tangible and intangible to be got by man. And on the other hand, the inequalities of the vast mass of English society are of exactly the same sort, and are "removable" only by just the same means, — namely, visible expenditure, dust-licking, patience, and careful imitation of the accepted social leaders. The very essence of Du Maurier's endless satire is, that the untitled English do not have their classes labeled, and that the scramble to acquire a better standing, and the premium on pretending to a better standing than one has, give rein to some of the meanest passions of human nature; brains and character count for as much or as little in one society as in the other; there is nothing more essentially ennobling in trying to get rich enough to be made a baronet or a lord, than in trying to get rich enough to be invited to the Jones's receptions or to refuse to invite them to your own; and aping the manners of lords is no more refining than aping those of the "first families" of Boston, New York, or Virginia. Bagehot's contention, in fact, reduces to two points: that there being several labeled ranks of society makes the boundaries of classes among the unlabeled one less doubtful;

Digitized by Google

and that the effort to get out of the latter into the former is more improving than the effort to climb from one of the latter to another, — both which need only statement for disproof. Plainly enough, he built an ingenious theory on the names aristocracy and democracy, without comparing either with facts.

The biographical papers vary much in merit; but the best of them are of the very first rank, among not only his writings but all writings of the kind. Like the literary essays, they are at once helped and harmed by his passion for making the facts support a theory; but the benefit is much greater than the injury. They have two special merits in great strength: they are wonderfully vivid in portrayal of character, — the subjects stand out like silhouettes, and one knows them almost like the hero of a novel; and they present the important political features of the times with stereoscopic and unforgetable clearness. In these respects he far surpassed the most famous master in this line, Lord Macaulay. One cannot form nearly so full and just an idea of the younger Pitt's equipment, or so clear an image of his personality, from Macaulay's biography as from Bagehot's; and the insight into the problems of Queen Anne's time to be gained from the "War of the Succession" is very superficial compared with that given by the masterly exposition in Bagehot's Bolingbroke. Bagehot, too, has an unequaled skill in so stating his facts and his deductions as to force one to remember them, — the highest triumph of a literary style. A careless person may read an essay of Macaulay's with great delight, carry away a wealth of glittering sentences, and be absolutely unable to remember the course or connection of events, — the uniform brilliancy destroying the perspective and leaving nothing salient for the mind to grasp; but nobody who reads one of Bagehot's historical papers can lose the clue to the politics of the time any more than he can forget his name.

The sketch of his father-in-law, Mr. Wilson, it would be unfair to judge by pure abstract standards. Its chief interest to me is its unconscious picture of the complacent provinciality, the application of their local standards to everything in the world, which has made the English government and many of the most high-minded and well-meaning English officials hated by every subject people in every age. Mr. Wilson was an able, upright, and utterly conscientious public man; he never had a doubt that the administrative machinery of England was the best possible for any country or people, that the taxes ought to be raised everywhere just as they were raised in England, that the way anything was done in England was the way it should be done everywhere; he was made

Digitized by Google

financial dictator of India, and proceeded to duplicate the English system there, in unruffled disregard both of the people and of the resident English officials who declared it unsuitable to the country: and his biographer, who has devoted his best powers elsewhere to exposing the folly of abstract systems, calmly tells us that if it did not work well it was the people's own fault, and they must not complain if the government put on the screws harder. Both may have been entirely right — but it is all very English, and an excellent object lesson.

The literary essays are unfailingly charming, and exhibit Bagehot's wit and freshness of view and keenness of insight, and the wide scope of his thought, more thoroughly than any other of his writings; and their criticism is often of the highest value. Yet I do not rate them his best. They have the merit and the defect of a consistent purpose, — a central theory which the details are marshaled to support. The merit is, that it makes them worth writing at all; the defect, that the theory may be wrong or incomplete, and the facts garbled to make out a case for it. For example, Macaulay's character and views are both distorted to round out Bagehot's theory of the literary temperament and its effects. The theory is only half true to begin with: the shrinking from life and preference for books which he attributes to an unsensitive disposition is often enough the result of the exact reverse, — an over-sensitive one, like a flayed man, which makes it hard to distinguish impressions because all hurt alike; Southey, the extreme type of the book man, exemplifies this. Macaulay could not have been the able administrator and effective parliamentary speaker he was, without much more capacity to see life and men with his own eyes than Bagehot allows him; and how any one can read the "Notes on the Indian Penal Code" and still maintain that Macaulay's residence in India taught him nothing, I cannot comprehend. And his judgment of the Puritans is grossly perverted: he, and not Carlyle, was the first to sweep away the current view that they were canting hypocrites whose religion makes their success harder instead of easier to understand; and both in the essays and in the "History of England" he attributes their power directly to their religious fervor, — his lack of sympathy with which makes his hearty appreciation of its effects all the more striking a proof of his intellectual acuteness. Bagehot more than atones for this, however, by a signal service to Macaulay's repute in pointing out that the vulgar cant which rates him as a mere windy rhetorician is the exact reverse of the truth, and that the source of his merits and defects alike was a hard unspiritual common-sense.

Digitized by Google

The miscellaneous nature of the essays was a great advantage to a shrewd and humorous mind like his, by not exacting a petty surface consistency: he could utter all sorts of contradictory or complementary half-truths, shoot the shafts of his wit at friend and foe alike, and gibe at all classes of society as their ridiculous aspects came into view. Any one dull enough to take all his fleers for cold and final judgments, and try to weave them into a consistent whole, would have a worse task than Michael Scott's devil. He seems to me to have had also, as such a mind often has, a strong element of sheer perversity. One of his chief delights — by a reactionary sympathy rather odd in a great thinker and literary man, and specially so in him as contrary to his whole theory of modern society — was to magnify the active and belittle the intellectual temperament; he is never tired of glorifying fox-hunters and youths who hate study, and sneering at the intellectual class, from Euclid and Newton, Macaulay and Mackintosh, to college tutors and impotent *littérateurs*. Yet in "Physics and Politics," where his serious purpose curbs his reckless wit, he credits the "pale preliminary students" with the main share in developing civilization; and in a remarkable passage makes the active temperament a serious drawback and evil temptation in modern life, and the increase of thoughtful quiet our great desideratum. The natural deduction would be, that the best work has been done by the best men, and that a class we need to have multiplied is a superior class. Surely it is an exception to everything else in the universe if the small body of pioneers have been the weakest part of the race, if the scarcest mental qualities are the least valuable, if the world's admiration is given to those who as a whole do not deserve it, if the fortunes of the world have depended and still depend on the fiberless and the purblind. Like others, Bagehot sometimes preferred one-sided wit to judicial truth. After this, it will seem like wanton paradox to say that I think his utterances on this point much more valuable and better worth heeding than most of those on the other side; but it is not. We hear quite enough of the other, and feeble recluse literary talent gets fully as much reverence as it earns; it is very wholesome to have it shrunk a little by a cold shower-bath of mockery, and a practical experience of life set up as the inexorable condition of having anything to say worth listening to. It is exaggerated, of course, but one must exaggerate to gain a hearing, — refined truth is not exciting; and there is no truer or weightier remark than Bagehot's, that literature is so comparatively sterile because "so few people that can write know anything."

Digitized by Google

His own "Lombard Street" is a splendid material argument of the above position: as he says, most business men cannot write, most writers know nothing of business, therefore most writing about business is either unreadable or untrue; he devoted the highest literary talent to the theme of his daily business, and has produced a book as solid as a market report and more charming than a novel. It is one of the marvels of literature. There has rarely been such an example of the triumph of style over matter, — Macaulay himself never succeeded in giving more exhaustless charm to things which few can make readable at all; and it is a striking example of his great faculty of illuminating every question by illustrations from the unlikeliest sources. There is a fascination about it surpassing that of any other of his writings: its luminous, easy, half-playful "business talk" is irresistibly captivating, and after reading it a hundred times, I cannot pick it up without reading a good share of it again. As to the validity of its criticisms or advice on banking matters, I know nothing and shall say nothing. The only strong review of the book was by Professor Bonamy Price in *Fraser's;* and while some of the professor's observations are highly acute and valuable, one grudges to admit any merit at all in the article on account of its virulent bitterness of tone, the extreme opposite to that of the book reviewed. The business man discusses his subject like a gentleman, and the professor like a termagant, — nothing new in controversies; and the latter becomes ponderously sarcastic with rage every time he thinks of the "insult" offered to the management of the Bank of England by the suggestions for bettering it, — something the author probably never dreamed of and the public certainly never noticed. Even a much smaller man is entitled to say, without committing the stupendous folly of expressing an opinion on the Bank case, that Professor Price's assault on Bagehot for confusion of technical terms is over-captious (the passage on this subject in the "Transferability of Capital" is evidently intended as an answer to it); that some of his assertions are simply angry reiterations, without fresh argument, of points Bagehot has contested; that others attack things in one part of the book which are cleared up in another part; and that nothing in it warrants any such amount of bad temper. Moreover, his position on the subject of panics, considered as a reply to Bagehot, makes one open his eyes very wide: it is the same thing in essence as telling the corpse of a man dead from fright that since all his organs are sound, he has no business to be dead, and in point of fact is not dead, and could perfectly well go on living if he chose. The obvious answer is, that none

Digitized by Google

the less he *is* dead. If a panic results in reducing a host of merchants to bankruptcy and small salaries, in reducing thousands of families from affluence to poverty, in destroying elegant homes and sending their inmates to tenements, in depriving boys of university educations and girls of social chances, it is a tremendous misfortune, even though, as Professor Price maintains, not a particle of actual capital is lost; it is to be averted by every possible means; and it is not presumptuous to say that Bagehot's preventives are much sounder than Professor Price's, which seem to consist of telling people that if they would have sense enough not to be scared they would not be harmed. This is of course true, but also worthless; it is excellent as general teaching, but childish in any particular crisis: and if business is based on a probability of facts instead of directly on the facts, it is inevitable that an apparent failure of the probability should produce for the time the same result as an actual failure of the facts. But all this is beside the vital qualities of "Lombard Street": its merits or defects as a banker's manual will have nothing to do with its immortality, for sooner or later its use in that capacity must pass away. It will live as a picture, not as a text-book; ages after the London of our time is as extinct as the Athens of Pericles, it will be read with delight as incomparably the best description of that London's business essence that anywhere exists.

Of the "Articles on the Depreciation of Silver," it must be said that the course of events has not thus far supported their thesis. It seems most probable that the increased use of tools of credit — which is the same thing as the growth of mutual confidence, bred by civilization and commerce — has permanently lessened the needful stock of coin, and that consequently the use and value of the bulkier metal have started on a downward road which can never ascend. If the great silver-using countries develop increased trade, they will probably use less silver instead of more, simply drawing more bills. But aside from their main purpose, the articles contain much admirable exposition of trade facts and principles, richly worth studying.

Of the "Letters on the French Coup d'État," there is not much to add to what Mr. Hutton and others have said. They are perennially entertaining and wholesome reading, full of racy wit and capital argument; they contain the essence of all his political philosophy, and he swerved very little from their main lines; and with all their limitations and perversities, they would be an invaluable manual for our politicians and legislators, — their faults are too opposed to our rooted instincts to do the smallest harm, and

Digitized by Google

they harp on those primary objects of all government which demagogues and buncombe representatives forget or never knew. They are still more remarkable as the only writings of so young a man on such a subject whose matter is of any permanent value, and as showing how early his capacity for reducing the confused details of life to an embracing principle gained its full stature.

As theological opinions rarely please any one but the holder, I may perhaps indulge in the luxury of pleasing myself in commenting on Bagehot's, without expecting concurrence from others. He was much too cool, skeptical, practical, and humorous for a great theologian or religious leader; but his acute and original intellect suffered no paralysis in this field, and he had one factor of the highest religious temperament,—a strong bent toward and liking for mysticism. Indeed, in the "First Edinburgh Reviewers" he asserts flatly that "mysticism is true,"—which is a matter of definition. This raised him far above Paley and his group in spiritual insight, and gave him a sympathetic understanding of some very obscure problems in religious history. The best of his polemic work is the unanswerable piece of destructive criticism on Professor Rogers and the extreme supporters of the "Analogy" in the essay on Bishop Butler; his best positive contribution to theology is the explanation why religion does not destroy morality, in the "Ignorance of Man." This essay is wonderfully ingenious and plausible, but not always convincing or satisfying. For example, the "screen" theory is excellent for the screened, but hard on the screen; in fact, it is simply our old friend the Calvinistic doctrine of election over again, in a less extreme and shocking form. That ninety-nine per cent. of all immortal souls were created simply to agonize the remaining one per cent. into elevated spirituality, is not quite so bad as that they were created for nothing except to be damned; but there is the same division into small aristocracy and vast rabble, both fixed as such by the Creator. It is the same old altar-piece toned down, with rags and crusts in place of the flames of hell. The truth is, a thinker reared under an aristocratic polity can hardly ever get it out of his head that there must be a small favored "upper class" in the divine councils, for whose behoof the great mass exist. The influence of earthly on divine constitutions will bear more analysis than it has received: that there has been so little democracy here is unquestionably the reason there has been so little in the theories of the hereafter. Perhaps God is more of a democrat than is currently allowed, and it may be reserved for the United States to renovate theological as it has political speculation. That the

Digitized by Google

dirty crowd was ever meant to be let into the fine parks of the future, is too shocking an idea from the aristocratic standpoint to be admitted, and rarely has been; Bagehot does not shut them out wholly, but preserves due subordination of ranks by reserving the "grand stand" for the spiritual nobility, — evidently holding that the spiritual world is organized on a "deferential" system like the English government, which by a happy chance is the best model not only for this world but the next.

There would be no difficulty in extending these comments to any length, — the difficulty is to stop; but I have said quite enough, and perhaps on some points too much. And after all, what has been said of other great writers is true of Bagehot and indeed of every great writer, — the best answer to all fault-finding is to read him. His untimely death lost the world a great store of high and fine enjoyment, as well as strong and satisfying thought; and closing my intimate daily companionship with him seems like parting from one who is at once a powerful teacher and a beloved comrade.

F. M.

Digitized by Google

MEMOIR.

BY RICHARD HOLT HUTTON.*

It is inevitable, I suppose, that the world should judge of a man chiefly by what it has gained in him and lost by his death, even though a very little reflection might sometimes show that the special qualities which made him so useful to the world implied others of a yet higher order, in which, to those who knew him well, these more conspicuous characteristics must have been well-nigh merged. And while of course it has given me great pleasure, as it must have given pleasure to all Bagehot's friends, to hear the Chancellor of the Exchequer's evidently genuine tribute to his financial sagacity in the Budget speech of 1877, and Lord Granville's eloquent acknowledgments of the value of Bagehot's political counsels as editor of the *Economist* in the speech delivered at the London University on May 9, 1877, I have sometimes felt somewhat unreasonably vexed that those who appreciated so well what I may almost call the smallest part of him, appeared to know so little of the essence of him, — of the high-spirited, buoyant, subtle, speculative nature, in which the imaginative qualities were even more remarkable than the judgment, and were indeed at the root of all that was strongest in the judgment; of the gay and dashing humor which was the life of every conversation in which he joined; and of the visionary nature to which the commonest things often seemed the most marvelous, and the marvelous things the most intrinsically probable. To those who hear of Bagehot only as an original political economist and a lucid political thinker, a curiously false image of him must be suggested. If they are among the multitude misled by Carlyle, who regard all political economists as "the dreary professors of a dismal science," they will probably conjure up an arid disquisitionist on value and cost of production; and even if assured of Bagehot's imaginative power, they may perhaps only understand by the expression that capacity for feverish preoccupation which makes the mention of "Peel's Act" summon up to the faces of certain fanatics a hectic glow, or the rumor of paper currencies blanch

* Originally published in the *Fortnightly Review;* republished with a few changes as an introduction to the "Literary Studies." Some of his allusions pertain only to that edition, but I have left them untouched. — Ed.

Digitized by Google

others with the pallor of true passion. The truth, however, is that the best qualities which Bagehot had, both as economist and as politician, were of a kind which the majority of economists and politicians do not specially possess. I do not mean that it was in any way an accident that he was an original thinker in either sphere; far from it. But I do think that what he brought to political and economic science he brought in some sense from *outside* their normal range, — that the man of business and the financier in him fell within such sharp and well-defined limits that he knew better than most of his class where their special weakness lay, and where their special functions ended. This, at all events, I am quite sure of: that so far as his judgment was sounder than other men's, — and on many subjects it was much sounder, — it was so not in spite of, but in consequence of, the excursive imagination and vivid humor which are so often accused of betraying otherwise sober minds into dangerous aberrations. In him both lucidity and caution were directly traceable to the force of his imagination.

Walter Bagehot was born at Langport, on Feb. 3, 1826. Langport is an old-fashioned little town in the center of Somersetshire, which in early days returned two members to Parliament, until the burgesses petitioned Edward I. to relieve them of the expense of paying their members, — a quaint piece of economy of which Bagehot frequently made humorous boast. The town is still a close corporation,* and calls its mayor by the old Saxon name of "Portreeve"; and Bagehot himself became its "deputy recorder," as well as a magistrate for the county. Situated at the point where the river Parret ceases to be navigable, Langport has always been a center of trade; and here in the last century Mr. Samuel Stuckey founded the Somersetshire Bank, which has since spread over the entire county, and is now the largest private bank of issue in England. Bagehot was the only surviving child of Mr. Thomas Watson Bagehot, who was for thirty years managing director and vice-chairman of Stuckey's Banking Company, and was (as Bagehot was fond of recalling), before he resigned that position, the oldest joint-stock banker in the United Kingdom. Bagehot succeeded his father as vice-chairman of the bank when the latter retired in his old age. His mother, a Miss Stuckey, was a niece of Mr. Samuel Stuckey, the founder of the Banking Company, and was a very pretty and lively woman, who had, by her previous marriage with a son of Dr. Estlin of Bristol, been brought at an early age into an intellectual atmosphere by which she had greatly profited. There

* The corporation of Langport was done away with, as was that of every one of the few remaining close corporations in England, during Mr. Gladstone's government, by the Municipal Corporation Act of 1883. — R. H. H.

Digitized by Google

is no doubt that Bagehot was greatly indebted to the constant and careful sympathy in all his studies that both she and his father gave him, as well as to a very studious disposition, for his future success. Dr. Prichard, the well-known ethnologist, was her brother-in-law; and her son's marked taste for science was first awakened in Dr. Prichard's house in Park Row, where Bagehot often spent his half-holidays while he was a schoolboy in Bristol. To Dr. Prichard's "Races of Man" may indeed be first traced that keen interest in the speculative side of ethnological research, the results of which are best seen in Bagehot's book on "Physics and Politics."

I first met Bagehot at University College, London, when we were neither of us over seventeen. I was struck by the questions put by a lad with large dark eyes and florid complexion to the late Professor De Morgan, who was lecturing to us, as his custom was, on the great difficulties involved in what we thought we all understood perfectly, — such, for example, as the meaning of 0, of negative quantities, or the grounds of probable expectation. Bagehot's questions showed that he had both read and thought more on these subjects than most of us; and I was eager to make his acquaintance, which soon ripened into an intimate friendship in which there was never any intermission between that time and his death. Some will regret that Bagehot did not go to Oxford; the reason being that his father, who was a Unitarian, objected on principle to all doctrinal tests, and would never have permitted a son of his to go to either of the older universities while those tests were required of the undergraduates. And I am not at all sure that University College, London, was not at that time a much more awakening place of education for young men than almost any Oxford college. Bagehot himself, I suspect, thought so. Fifteen years later he wrote, in his essay on Shelley: — "A distinguished pupil of the University of Oxford once observed to us, 'The use of the University of Oxford is, that no one can overread himself there. The appetite for knowledge is repressed.'" And whatever may have been defective in University College, London, — and no doubt much was defective, — nothing of the kind could have been said of it when we were students there. Indeed, in those years London was a place with plenty of intellectual stimulus in it for young men, while in University College itself there was quite enough vivacious and original teaching to make that stimulus available to the full. It is sometimes said that it needs the quiet of a country town, remote from the capital, to foster the love of genuine study in young men. But of this at least I am sure: that Gower Street, and Oxford Street, and the New Road, and the dreary chain of

Digitized by Google

squares from Euston to Bloomsbury, were the scenes of discussions as eager and as abstract as ever were the sedate cloisters or the flowery river meadows of Cambridge or Oxford. Once, I remember, in the vehemence of our argument as to whether the so-called logical principle of identity (A is A) were entitled to rank as "a law of thought" or only as a postulate of language, Bagehot and I wandered up and down Regent Street for something like two hours in the vain attempt to find Oxford Street.

> "And yet what days were those, Parmenides,
> When we were young, when we could number friends
> In all the Italian cities like ourselves;
> When with elated hearts we joined your train,
> Ye sun-born virgins, on the road of truth!
> Then we could still enjoy, then neither thought
> Nor outward things were closed and dead to us,
> But we received the shock of mighty thoughts
> On single minds with a pure natural joy;
> And if the sacred load oppressed our brain,
> We had the power to feel the pressure eased,
> The brow unbound, the thoughts flow free again
> In the delightful commerce of the world."*

Bagehot has himself described, evidently from his own experience, the kind of life we lived in those days, in an article on "Oxford Reform":†—"So too in youth, the real plastic energy is not in tutors or lectures or in books 'got up,' but in Wordsworth and Shelley; in the books that all read because all like; in what all talk of because all are interested; in the argumentative walk or disputatious lounge; in the impact of young thought upon young thought, of fresh thought on fresh thought, of hot thought on hot thought; in mirth and refutation, in ridicule and laughter: for these are the free play of the natural mind, and these cannot be got without a college."

The late Professor Sewell, when asked to give his pupils some clear conception of the old Greek sophists, is said to have replied that he could not do this better than by referring them to the professors of University College, London. I do not think there was much force in the sarcasm; for though Professor T. Hewitt Key, whose restless and ingenious mind led him many a wild dance after etymological Will-of-the-Wisps,—I remember, for instance, his

* Matthew Arnold, "Empedocles on Etna,"—an early poem, omitted from some later editions, but included in that of 1888 (Macmillan's, 3 vols.).

† *Prospective Review* for August, 1852; a paper too strictly temporary and practical in its aim for republication now.—R. H. H. [See extract following this memoir.]

Digitized by Google

cheerfully accepting the suggestion that "better" and "bad," *melior* and *malus*, came from the same root, and accounting for it by the probable disposition of hostile tribes to call everything bad which their enemies called good, and everything good which their enemies called bad, — may have had in him much of the brilliance, and something also, perhaps, of the flightiness of the old sophist, it would be hard to imagine men more severe in exposing pretentious conceits and dispelling dreams of theoretic omniscience than Professors De Morgan, Malden, and Long. De Morgan, who at that time was in the midst of his controversy on formal logic with Sir William Hamilton, was indeed characterized by the great Edinburgh metaphysician as "profound in mathematics, curious in logic, but wholly deficient in architectonic power"; yet for all that, his lectures on the Theory of Limits were a far better logical discipline for young men than Sir William Hamilton's on the Law of the Unconditioned or the Quantification of the Predicate. Professor Malden contrived to imbue us with a love of that fastidious taste and that exquisite nicety in treating questions of scholarship, which has perhaps been more needed and less cultivated in Gower Street than any other of the higher elements of a college education; while Professor Long's caustic irony, accurate and almost ostentatiously dry learning, and profoundly stoical temperament, were as antithetic to the temper of the sophist as human qualities could possibly be.

The time of our college life was pretty nearly contemporaneous with the life of the Anti-Corn-Law League and the great agitation in favor of Free Trade. To us this was useful rather from the general impulse it gave to political discussion, and the literary curiosity it excited in us as to the secret of true eloquence, than because it anticipated in any considerable degree the later acquired taste for economic science. Bagehot and I seldom missed an opportunity of hearing together the matchless practical disquisitions of Mr. Cobden, — lucid and homely, yet glowing with intense conviction, — the profound passion and careless though artistic scorn of Mr. Bright, and the artificial and elaborately ornate periods, and witty though somewhat *ad captandum* epigrams, of Mr. W. J. Fox (afterwards M. P. for Oldham). Indeed, we scoured London together to hear any kind of oratory that had gained a reputation of its own, and compared all we heard with the declamation of Burke and the rhetoric of Macaulay, many of whose later essays came out and were eagerly discussed by us while we were together at college. In our conversations on these essays, I remember that I always bitterly attacked, while Bagehot moderately defended, the glorification of compromise which marks all Macaulay's writings.

Digitized by Google

Even in early youth Bagehot had much of that "animated moderation" which he praises so highly in his latest work. He was a voracious reader, especially of history, and had a far truer appreciation of historical conditions than most young thinkers; indeed, the broad historical sense which characterized him from first to last made him more alive than ordinary students to the urgency of circumstance, and far less disposed to indulge in abstract moral criticism from a modern point of view. On theology, as on all other subjects, Bagehot was at this time more conservative than myself, he sharing his mother's orthodoxy, and I at that time accepting heartily the Unitarianism of my own people. Theology was, however, I think, the only subject on which in later life we — to some degree, at least — exchanged places; though he never at any time, however doubtful he may have become on some of the cardinal issues of historical Christianity, accepted the Unitarian position. Indeed, within the last two or three years of his life, he spoke on one occasion of the Trinitarian doctrine as probably the best account which human reason could render of the mystery of the self-existent mind.

In those early days Bagehot's manner was often supercilious. We used to attack him for his intellectual arrogance, — his ὕβρις we called it in our college slang; a quality which I believe was not really in him, though he had then much of its external appearance. Nevertheless, his genuine contempt for what was intellectually feeble was not accompanied by an even adequate appreciation of his own powers. At college, however, his satirical "Hear, hear" was a formidable sound in the debating society, and one which took the heart out of many a younger speaker; and the ironical "How much?" with which in conversation he would meet an over-eloquent expression, was always of a nature to reduce a man, as the mathematical phrase goes, to his "lowest terms." In maturer life he became much gentler and mellower, and often even delicately considerate for others; but his inner scorn for ineffectual thought remained in some degree, though it was very reticently expressed, to the last. For instance, I remember his attacking me for my mildness in criticizing a book which, though it professed to rest on a basis of clear thought, really missed all its points. "There is a pale, whity-brown substance," he wrote to me, "in the man's books, which people who don't think take for thought, but it isn't;" and he upbraided me much for not saying plainly that the man was a muff. In his youth this scorn for anything like the vain beating of the wings in the attempt to think was at its maximum. It was increased, I think, by that which was one of his greatest qualities, —

Digitized by Google

his remarkable "detachment" of mind; in other words, his comparative inaccessibility to the contagion of blind sympathy. Most men, more or less unconsciously, shrink from even *thinking* what they feel to be out of sympathy with the feelings of their neighbors, unless under some strong incentive to do so; and in this way the sources of much true and important criticism are dried up through the mere diffusion and ascendancy of conventional but sincere habits of social judgment. And no doubt for the greater number of us this is much the best: we are worth more for the purpose of constituting and strengthening the cohesive power of the social bond than we should ever be worth for the purpose of criticizing feebly — and with little effect, perhaps, except the disorganizing effect of seeming ill-nature — the various incompetencies and miscarriages of our neighbors' intelligence. But Bagehot's intellect was always far too powerful and original to render him available for the function of mere social cement; and full as he was of genuine kindness and hearty personal affections, he certainly had not in any high degree that sensitive instinct as to what others would feel which so often shapes even the thoughts of men, and still oftener their speech, into mild and complaisant but unmeaning and unfruitful forms.

Thus it has been said that in his very amusing article on Crabb Robinson, published in the *Fortnightly Review* for August, 1869, he was more than a little rough in his delineation of that quaint old friend of our earlier days; and certainly there is something of the naturalist's realistic manner of describing the habits of a new species in the paper, though there is not a grain of malice or even depreciatory bias in it, and though there is a very sincere regard manifested throughout. But that essay will illustrate admirably what I mean by saying that Bagehot's detachment of mind, and the deficiency in him of any aptitude for playing the part of mere social cement, tended to give the impression of an intellectual arrogance which — certainly in the sense of self-esteem or self-assertion — did not in the least belong to him. In the essay I have just mentioned he describes how Crabb Robinson, when he gave his somewhat famous breakfast parties, used to forget to make the tea, then lost his keys, then told a long story about a bust of Wieland during the extreme agony of his guests' appetites, and finally, perhaps, withheld the cup of tea he had at last poured out while he regaled them with a poem of Wordsworth's or a diatribe against Hazlitt. And Bagehot adds: — "The more astute of his guests used to breakfast before they came; and then there was much interest in seeing a steady literary man, who did not understand the region, in agonies at having to hear three stories before he got his tea, one again

Digitized by Google

between his milk and his sugar, another between his butter and his toast, and additional zest in making a stealthy inquiry that was sure to intercept the coming delicacies by bringing on Schiller and Goethe." The only "astute" person referred to was, I imagine, Bagehot himself, who confessed to me, much to my amusement, that this was always his own precaution before one of Crabb Robinson's breakfasts. I doubt if anybody else ever thought of it. It was very characteristic in him that he should have not only noticed — for that, of course, any one might do — this weak element in Crabb Robinson's breakfasts, but should have kept it so distinctly before his mind as to make it the center, as it were, of a policy, and the opportunity of a mischievous stratagem to try the patience of others: It showed how much of the social naturalist there was in him. If any race of animals could understand a naturalist's account of their ways and habits, and of the devices he adopted to get those ways and habits more amusingly or instructively displayed before him, no doubt they would think that he was a cynic; and it was this intellectual detachment, as of a social naturalist, from the society in which he moved, which made Bagehot's remarks often seem somewhat harsh, when in fact they were animated not only by no suspicion of malice, but by the most cordial and earnest friendliness. Owing to this separateness of mind, he described more strongly and distinctly traits which, when delineated by a friend, we expect to find painted in the softened manner of one who is half disposed to imitate or adopt them.

Yet, though I have used the word "naturalist" to denote the keen and solitary observation with which Bagehot watched society, no word describes him worse if we attribute to it any of that coldness and stillness of curiosity which we are apt to associate with scientific vigilance. Especially in his youth, buoyancy, vivacity, velocity of thought were of the essence of the impression which he made. He had high spirits and great capacities for enjoyment; great sympathies, indeed, with the old English Cavalier. In his essay on Macaulay he paints that character with profound sympathy.

"What historian, indeed," he says, "has ever estimated the Cavalier character? There is Clarendon, the grave, rhetorical, decorous lawyer; piling words, congealing arguments; very stately, a little grim. There is Hume, the Scotch metaphysician, who has made out the best case for such people as never were, — for a Charles who never died, for a Strafford who could never have been attainted; a saving, calculating North-countryman, fat, impassive, who lived on eightpence a day. What have these people to do with an enjoying English gentleman? Talk of the ways of spreading a wholesome Conservatism throughout the country: . . . as far as communicating and establishing your creed is concerned, try a little pleasure.

Digitized by Google

The way to keep up old customs is, to enjoy old customs; the way to be satisfied with the present state of things is, to enjoy that state of things. Over the 'Cavalier' mind this world passes with a thrill of delight; there is an exultation in a daily event, zest in the 'regular thing,' joy at an old feast."

And that aptly represents himself. Such arrogance as he seemed to have in early life was the arrogance as much of enjoyment as of detachment of mind; the *insouciance* of the old Cavalier as much at least as the calm of a mind not accessible to the contagion of social feelings. He always talked, in youth, of his spirits as inconveniently high: and once wrote to me that he did not think they were quite as "boisterous" as they had been, and that his fellow-creatures were not sorry for the abatement; nevertheless, he added, "I am quite fat, gross, and ruddy." He was indeed excessively fond of hunting, vaulting, and almost all muscular effort; so that his life would be wholly misconceived by any one who, hearing of his "detachment" of thought, should picture his mind as a vigilantly observant, far-away intelligence, — such as Hawthorne's, for example. He liked to be in the thick of the *mêlée* when talk grew warm, though he was never so absorbed in it as not to keep his mind cool.

As I said, Bagehot was a Somersetshire man, with all the richness of nature and love for the external glow of life which the most characteristic counties of the Southwest of England contrive to give to their most characteristic sons.

"This northwest corner of Spain," he wrote once to a newspaper from the Pyrenees, "is the only place out of England where I should like to live. It is a sort of better Devonshire: the coast is of the same kind, the sun is more brilliant, the sea is more brilliant, and there are mountains in the background. I have seen some more beautiful places, and many grander; but I should not like to live in them. As Mr. Emerson puts it, 'I do not want to go to heaven before my time.' My English nature, by early use and long habit, is tied to a certain kind of scenery, soon feels the want of it, and is apt to be alarmed as well as pleased at perpetual snow and all sorts of similar beauties. But here, about San Sebastian, you have the best England can give you (at least if you hold, as I do, that Devonshire is the finest of our counties), and the charm, the ineffable, indescribable charm of the South too. Probably the sun has some secret effect on the nervous system that makes one inclined to be pleased; but the golden light lies upon everything, and one fancies that one is charmed only by the outward loveliness."

The vivacity and warm coloring of the landscapes of the South of England certainly had their full share in molding his tastes, and possibly even his style.

Bagehot took the mathematical scholarship with his Bachelor's degree in the University of London in 1846, and the gold medal in

Digitized by Google

Intellectual and Moral Philosophy with his Master's degree in 1848, in reading for which he mastered for the first time those principles of political economy which were to receive so much illustration from his genius in later years. But at this time philosophy, poetry, and theology had, I think, a much greater share of his attention than any narrow and more sharply defined science. Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth, Coleridge, Martineau, and John Henry Newman, all in their way exerted a great influence over his mind, and divided not unequally with the authors whom he was bound to study — that is, the Greek philosophers, together with Hume, Kant, J. S. Mill, and Sir William Hamilton — the time at his disposal. I have no doubt that for seven or eight years of his life the Roman Catholic Church had a great fascination for his imagination, though I do not think that he was ever at all near conversion. He was intimate with all Dr. Newman's writings; and of these the Oxford sermons, and the poems in the "Lyra Apostolica" afterwards separately published — partly, I believe, on account of the high estimate of them which Bagehot had himself expressed — were always his special favorites. The little poetry he wrote — and it is evident that he never had the kind of instinct for, or command of, language which is the first condition of genuine poetic genius — seems to me to have been obviously written under the spell which Dr. Newman's own few but finely chiseled poems had cast upon him. If I give one specimen of Bagehot's poems, it is not that I think it in any way an adequate expression of his powers, but for a very different reason, — because it will show those who have inferred from his other writings that his mind never deeply concerned itself with religion, how great is their mistake. Nor is there any real poverty of resource in these lines, except perhaps in the awkward mechanism of some of them. They were probably written when he was twenty-three or twenty-four.

"To the Roman Catholic Church.

"'Casta inceste.' — *Lucretius.*

"Thy lamp of faith is brightly trimmed,
Thy eager eye is not yet dimmed,
Thy stalwart step is yet unstayed,
Thy words are well obeyed.

"Thy proud voice vaunts of strength from heaven,
Thy proud foes carp, 'By hell's art given:'
No Titan thou of earth-born bands,
Strange Church of hundred hands.

Digitized by Google

"Nursed without knowledge, born of night,
With hand of power and thoughts of light,
As Britain seas far-reachingly
O'er-rul'st thou history.

"Wild as La Pucelle in her hour,
O'er prostrate realms with awe-girt power
Thou marchest stedfast on thy path
Through wonder, love, and wrath.

"And will thy end be such as hers,
O'erpowered by earthly mail-clad powers,
Condemned for cruel, magic art,
Though awful, bold of heart?

"Through thorn-clad Time's unending waste
With ardent step alone thou strayest,
As Jewish scape-goats tracked the wild,
Unholy, consecrate, defiled.

"Use not thy truth in manner rude
To rule for gain the multitude,
Or thou wilt see that truth depart,
To seek some holier heart;

"Then thou wilt watch thy errors lorn,
O'erspread by shame, o'erswept by scorn,
In lonely want without hope's smile,
As Tyre her weed-clad Isle.

"Like once thy chief, thou bear'st Christ's name;
Like him thou hast denied his shame,
Bold, eager, skillful, confident:
Oh, now like him repent!"

That has certainly no sign of the hand of the master in it, for the language is not molded and vivified by the thought; but the thought itself is fine. And there is still better evidence than these lines would afford of the fascination which the Roman Catholic Church had for Bagehot. A year or two later, in the letters on the *Coup d'État*, to which I shall soon have to refer, there occurs the following passage. He is trying to explain how the cleverness, the moral restlessness, and the intellectual impatience of the French all tend to unfit them for a genuine parliamentary government:—

"I do not know that I can exhibit the way these qualities of the French character operate on their opinions better than by telling you how the Roman Catholic Church deals with them. I have rather attended to it since I came here: it gives sermons almost an interest, their being in French, and to those curious in intellectual matters it is worth observing. In other times—and even now in out-of-the-way Spain I suppose it may be

Digitized by Google

so—the Catholic Church was opposed to inquiry and reasoning; but it is not so now and here: loudly, from the pens of a hundred writers, from the tongues of a thousand pulpits, in every note of thrilling scorn and exulting derision, she proclaims the contrary. Be she Christ's workman or Antichrist's, she knows her work too well. 'Reason, reason, reason!' exclaims she to the philosophers of this world; 'put in practice what you teach, if you would have others believe it; be consistent; do not prate to us of private judgment when you are but yourselves repeating what you heard in the nursery,—ill-mumbled remnants of a Catholic tradition. No! exemplify what you command,—inquire and make search; seek, though we warn you that ye will never find—yet do as ye will. Shut yourself up in a room, make your mind a blank, go down (as ye speak) into the "depths of your consciousness," scrutinize the mental structure, inquire for the elements of belief, spend years, your best years, in the occupation; and at length, when your eyes are dim and your brain hot and your hand unsteady, then reckon what you have gained: see if you cannot count on your fingers the certainties you have reached; reflect which of them you doubted yesterday, which you may disbelieve to-morrow: or rather, make haste, assume at random some essential *credenda*, write down your inevitable postulates, enumerate your necessary axioms; toil on, toil on, spin your spider's-web, adore your own souls; or if ye prefer it, choose some German nostrum,—try the "intellectual intuition," or the "pure reason," or the "intelligible ideas," or the mesmeric clairvoyance,—and when so or somehow you have attained your results, try them on mankind. Don't go out into the highways and hedges,—it is unnecessary: ring the bell, call in the servants, give them a course of lectures; cite Aristotle, review Descartes, panegyrize Plato, and see if the *bonne* will understand you. It is you that say, "Vox populi, vox Dei"; but you see the people reject you. Or suppose you succeed,—what you call succeeding: your books are read; for three weeks or even a season you are the idol of the *salons;* your hard words are on the lips of women,—then a change comes: a new actress appears at the Théâtre Français or the Opéra,—her charms eclipse your theories; or a great catastrophe occurs, political liberty (it is said) is annihilated,—"Il faut se faire mouchard" is the observation of scoffers: anyhow, *you* are forgotten; fifty years may be the gestation of a philosophy, not three its life; before long, before you go to your grave, your six disciples leave you for some newer master or to set up for themselves. The poorest priest in the remotest region of the *Basses Alpes* has more power over men's souls than human cultivation: his ill-mouthed masses move women's souls—can you? Ye scoff at Jupiter: yet he at least was believed in, you never have been; idol for idol, the *de*throned is better than the *un*throned. No: if you would reason, if you would teach, if you would speculate, come to us. We have our premises ready: years upon years before you were born, intellects whom the best of you delight to magnify, toiled to systematize the creed of ages; years upon years after you are dead, better heads than yours will find new matter there to define, to divide, to arrange. Consider the hundred volumes of Aquinas: which of you desire a higher life than that,—to deduce, to subtilize, discriminate, systematize, and decide the highest truth, and to be believed? yet such was his luck, his enjoyment; he was what you would be. No, no: *credite, credite.* Ours is the life of speculation; the cloister is the home for the student. Philosophy is stationary, Catholicism progressive.

Digitized by Google

You call, we are heard—' etc., etc. So speaks each preacher according to his ability. And when the dust and noise of present controversies have passed away, and in the silence of the night some grave historian writes out the tale of half-forgotten times, let him not forget to observe that skillfully as the mediæval Church subdued the superstitious cravings of a painful and barbarous age, in after years she dealt more discerningly still with the feverish excitement, the feeble vanities, and the dogmatic impatience of an over-intellectual generation."

It is obvious, I think, both from the poem and from these reflections, that what attracted Bagehot in the Church of Rome was the historical prestige and social authority which she had accumulated in believing and uncritical ages for use in the unbelieving and critical age in which we live; while what he condemned and dreaded in her was her tendency to use her power over the multitude for purposes of a low ambition.

And as I am on this subject, this will be, I think, the best opportunity I shall have to say what I have got to say of Bagehot's later religious belief, without returning to it when I have to deal with a period in which the greatest part of his spare intellectual energy was given to other subjects. I do not think that the religious affections were very strong in Bagehot's mind; but the primitive religious instincts certainly were. From childhood he was what he certainly remained to the last, in spite of the rather antagonistic influence of the able scientific group of men from whom he learned so much, — a thorough transcendentalist; by which I mean, one who could never doubt that there was a real foundation of the universe distinct from the outward show of its superficial qualities, and that the substance is never exhaustively expressed in these qualities. He often repeats in his essays Shelley's fine line, "Lift not the painted veil which those who live call life;" and the essence at least of the idea in it haunted him from his very childhood. In the essay on Hartley Coleridge, — perhaps the most perfect in style of any of his writings, — he describes most powerfully, and evidently in great measure from his own experience, the mysterious confusion between appearances and realities which so bewildered little Hartley: the difficulty that he complained of in distinguishing between the various Hartleys, — "picture Hartley," "shadow Hartley," ["echo Hartley,"] — and between Hartley the subject and Hartley the object, the enigmatic blending of which last two Hartleys the child expressed by catching hold of his own arm, and then calling himself the "catch-me-fast Hartley." And in dilating on this bewildering experience of the child's, Bagehot borrows from his own recollections: —

Digitized by Google

"All children have a world of their own, as distinct from that of the grown people who gravitate around them as the dreams of girlhood from our prosaic life, or the ideas of the kitten that plays with the falling leaves from those of her carnivorous mother that catches mice and is sedulous in her domestic duties. But generally, about this interior existence, children are dumb. You have warlike ideas; but you cannot say to a sinewy relative, 'My dear aunt, I wonder when the big bush in the garden will begin to walk about; I'm sure it's a crusader, and I was cutting it all the day with my steel sword. But what do you think, aunt? for I'm puzzled about its legs, because you see, aunt, it has only *one* stalk; and besides, aunt, the leaves.' You cannot remark this in secular life; but you hack at the infelicitous bush till you do not altogether reject the idea that your small garden is Palestine, and yourself the most adventurous of knights."

They have a tradition in the family that this is but a fragment from Bagehot's own imaginative childhood, and certainly this visionary element in him was very vivid to the last. However, the transcendental or intellectual basis of religious belief was soon strengthened in him, as readers of his remarkable paper on Bishop Butler will easily see, by those moral and retributive instincts which warn us of the meaning and consequences of guilt:—

"The moral principle," he wrote in that essay, "(whatever may be said to the contrary by complacent thinkers,) is really and to most men a principle of fear. . . . Conscience is the condemnation of ourselves; we expect a penalty. As the Greek proverb teaches, 'Where there is shame there is fear.' . . . How to be free from this, is the question; how to get loose from this; how to be rid of the secret tie which binds the strong man and cramps his pride, and makes him angry at the beauty of the universe,—which will not let him go forth like a great animal, like the king of the forest, in the glory of his might, but restrains him with an inner fear and a secret foreboding that if he do but exalt himself he shall be abased, if he do but set forth his own dignity he will offend ONE who will deprive him of it. This, as has often been pointed out, is the source of the bloody rites of heathendom."

And then, after a powerful passage, in which he describes the sacrificial superstitions of men like Achilles, he returns, with a flash of his own peculiar humor, to Bishop Butler, thus:—

"Of course it is not this kind of fanaticism that we impute to a prelate of the English Church: human sacrifices are not respectable, and Achilles was not rector of Stanhope. But though the costume and circumstances of life change, the human heart does not; its feelings remain. The same anxiety, the same consciousness of personal sin which lead in barbarous times to what has been described, show themselves in civilized life as well. In this quieter period, their great manifestation is scrupulosity;"

which he goes on to describe as a sort of inexhaustible anxiety for perfect compliance with the minutest positive commands which may

Digitized by Google

be made the condition of forgiveness for the innumerable lapses of moral obligation. I am not criticizing the paper, or I should point out that Bagehot failed in it to draw out the distinction between the primitive moral instinct and the corrupt superstition into which it runs; but I believed that he recognized the weight of this moral testimony of the conscience to a divine Judge, as well as the transcendental testimony of the intellect to an eternal substance of things, to the end of his life. And certainly, in the reality of human free-will as the condition of all genuine moral life he firmly believed. In his "Physics and Politics" — the subtle and original essay upon which, in conjunction with the essay on the "English Constitution," Bagehot's reputation as a European thinker chiefly rests — he repeatedly guards himself (for instance, pages 432, 433) against being supposed to think that in accepting the principle of evolution, he has accepted anything inconsistent either with spiritual creation or with the free-will of man. On the latter point he adds: —

> "No doubt the modern doctrine of the 'conservation of force,' if applied to decision, is inconsistent with free-will: if you hold that force is 'never lost or gained,' you cannot hold that there is a real gain, — a sort of new creation of it in free volition. But I have nothing to do here with the universal 'conservation of force': the conception of the nervous organs as stores of will-made power does not raise or need so vast a discussion."

And in the same book he repeatedly uses the expression "Providence," evidently in its natural meaning, to express the ultimate force at work behind the march of "evolution." Indeed, in conversation with me on this subject, he often said how much higher a conception of the creative mind the new Darwinian ideas seemed to him to have introduced, as compared with those contained in what is called the argument from contrivance and design. On the subject of personal immortality, too, I do not think that Bagehot ever wavered. He often spoke, and even wrote, of "that vague sense of eternal continuity which is always about the mind, and which no one could bear to lose," and described it as being much more important to us than it even appears to be, important as that is; for, he said, "when we think we are thinking of the past, we are only thinking of a future that is to be like it." But with the exception of these cardinal points, I could hardly say how much Bagehot's mind was or was not affected by the great speculative controversies of later years. Certainly he became much more doubtful concerning the force of the historical evidence of Christianity than

Digitized by Google

I ever was, and rejected, I think entirely, — though on what amount of personal study he had founded his opinion I do not know, — the Apostolic origin of the fourth Gospel. Possibly his mind may have been latterly in suspense as to miracle altogether, though I am pretty sure that he had not come to a negative conclusion. He belonged, in common with myself, during the last years of his life, to a society in which these fundamental questions were often discussed ; but he seldom spoke in it, and told me very shortly before his death that he shrank from such discussions on religious points, feeling that in debates of this kind they were not and could not be treated with anything like thoroughness. On the whole, I think the cardinal article of his faith would be adequately represented even in the latest period of his life by the following passage in his essay on Bishop Butler : —

"In every step of religious argument we require the assumption, the belief — the faith, if the word is better — in an absolutely *perfect* Being, in and by whom we are, who is omnipotent as well as most holy, who 'moves on the face' of the whole world and ruleth 'all things by the word of his power.' If we grant this, the difficulty of the opposition between what is here called the 'natural' and the 'supernatural' religion is removed ; and without granting it, that difficulty is perhaps insuperable. It follows from the very idea and definition of an infinitely perfect Being, that he is without us as well as within us : ruling the clouds of the air and the fishes of the sea as well as the fears and thoughts of man ; smiling through the smile of nature as well as warning with the pain of conscience ; 'sine qualitate bonum, sine quantitate magnum, sine indigentia creatorem, sine situ præsidentem, sine habitu omnia continentem, sine loco ubique totum, sine tempore sempiternum, sine ulla sui mutatione mutabilia facientem ; nihilque patientem.' If we assume this, life is simple ; without this all is dark."

Evidently, then, though Bagehot held that the doctrine of evolution by natural selection gave a higher conception of the Creator than the old doctrine of mechanical design, he never took any materialistic view of evolution. One of his early essays, written while at college, on some of the many points of the Kantian philosophy which he then loved to discuss, concluded with a remarkable sentence, which would probably have fairly expressed even at the close of his life his profound belief in God, and his partial sympathy with the agnostic view that we are in great measure incapable of apprehending, more than very dimly, his mind or purposes : — "Gazing after the infinite essence, we are like men watching through the drifting clouds for a glimpse of the true heavens on a drear November day ; layer after layer passes from our view, but still the same immovable gray rack remains."

Digitized by Google

After Bagehot had taken his Master's degree, and while he was still reading law in London, and hesitating between the bar and the family bank, there came as principal to University Hall (which is a hall of residence in connection with University College, London, established by the Presbyterians and Unitarians after the passing of the Dissenters' Chapel Act), the man who had, I think, a greater intellectual fascination for Bagehot than any of his contemporaries, — Arthur Hugh Clough, Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford, and author of various poems of great genius more or less familiar to the public; though Clough is perhaps better known as the subject of the exquisite poem written on his death in 1861 by his friend Matthew Arnold — the poem to which he gave the name of "Thyrsis" — than by even the most popular of his own. Bagehot had subscribed for the erection of University Hall, and took an active part at one time on its council. Thus he saw a good deal of Clough, and did what he could to mediate between that enigma to Presbyterian parents — a college head who held himself serenely neutral on almost all moral and educational subjects interesting to parents and pupils, except the observance of disciplinary rules — and the managing body, who bewildered him and were by him bewildered. I don't think either Bagehot or Clough's other friends were very successful in their mediation: but he at least gained in Clough a cordial friend, and a theme of profound intellectual and moral interest to himself which lasted him his life, and never failed to draw him into animated discussion long after Clough's own premature death; and I think I can trace the effect which some of Clough's writings had on Bagehot's mind to the very end of his career. There were some points of likeness between Bagehot and Clough, but many more of difference. Both had the capacity for boyish spirits in them, and the florid color which usually accompanies a good deal of animal vigor; both were reserved men, with a great dislike of anything like the appearance of false sentiment, and both were passionate admirers of Wordsworth's poetry: but Clough was slightly lymphatic, with a great tendency to unexpressed and unacknowledged discouragement, and to the paralysis of silent embarrassment when suffering from such feelings; while Bagehot was keen, and very quickly evacuated embarrassing positions and never returned to them. When however, Clough was happy and at ease, there was a calm and silent radiance in his face, and his head was set with a kind of stateliness on his shoulders, that gave him almost an Olympian air; but this would sometimes vanish in a moment into an embarrassed taciturnity that was quite uncouth. One of his friends declares that the man who was said

Digitized by Google

to be "a cross between a schoolboy and a bishop" must have been like Clough. There was in Clough, too, a large Chaucerian simplicity and a flavor of homeliness; so that now and then, when the light shone into his eyes, there was something, in spite of the air of fine scholarship and culture, which reminded one of the best likenesses of Burns. It was of Clough, I believe, that Emerson was thinking (though, knowing Clough intimately as he did, he was of course speaking mainly in joke) when he described the Oxford of that day thus: "'Ah,' says my languid Oxford gentleman, 'nothing new or true — and no matter.'"* No saying could misrepresent Clough's really buoyant and simple character more completely than that; but doubtless many of his sayings and writings, treating as they did most of the greater problems of life as insoluble, and enjoining a self-possessed composure under the discovery of their insolubility, conveyed an impression very much like this to men who came only occasionally in contact with him. Bagehot, in his article on Crabb Robinson, says that the latter, who in those days seldom remembered names, always described Clough as "that admirable and accomplished man — you know whom I mean — the one who never says anything." And certainly Clough was often taciturn to the last degree, or if he opened his lips, delighted to open them only to scatter confusion by discouraging, in words at least, all that that was then called "earnestness"; as for example by asking, "Was it ordained that twice two should make four, simply for the intent that boys and girls should be cut to the heart that they do not make five? Be content; when the veil is raised, perhaps they will make five! Who knows?"†

Clough's chief fascination for Bagehot was, I think, that he had as a poet in some measure rediscovered, at all events realized as few ever realized before, the enormous difficulty of finding truth, — a difficulty which he somewhat paradoxically held to be enhanced rather than diminished by the intensity of the truest modern passion for it. The stronger the desire, he teaches, the greater is the danger of illegitimately satisfying that desire by persuading ourselves that what we *wish* to believe is true, and the greater the danger of ignoring the actual confusions of human things: —

"Rules baffle instincts, instincts rules,
Wise men are bad, and good are fools,
Facts evil, wishes vain appear,
We cannot go, why are we here?

"Oh, may we, for assurance' sake,
Some arbitrary judgment take,

* Essay on Montaigne, in "Representative Men."

† "Clough's Poems and Prose Remains," Vol. i., page 175.

Digitized by Google

And willfully pronounce it clear,
For this or that 'tis, we are here?

"Or is it right, and will it do,
To pace the sad confusion through,
And say, It does not yet appear
What we shall be — what we are here?"

This warning to withhold judgment, and not cheat ourselves into beliefs which our own imperious desire to believe had alone engendered, is given with every variety of tone and modulation, and couched in all sorts of different forms of fancy and apologue, throughout Clough's poems. He insists on "the *ruinous* force of the will" to persuade us of illusions which please us; of the tendency of practical life to give us beliefs which suit that practical life, but are none the truer for that; and is never weary of warning us that a firm belief in a falsity can be easily generated:—

"*Action will furnish belief*, — but will that belief be the true one?
This is the point, you know. However, it doesn't much matter.
What one wants, I suppose, is to predetermine the action,
So as to make it entail, not a chance belief but the true one."

This practical preaching, which Clough urges in season and out of season, met an answering chord in Bagehot's mind, not so much in relation to religious belief as in relation to the over-haste and over-eagerness of human conduct; and I can trace the effect of it in all his writings, political and otherwise, to the end of his life. Indeed, it affected him much more in later days than in the years immediately following his first friendship with Clough. With all his boyish dash, there was something in Bagehot even in youth which dreaded precipitancy; and not only precipitancy itself, but those moral situations tending to precipitancy which men who have no minds of their own to make up, so often court. In later life he pleased himself by insisting that on Darwin's principle, civilized men, with all the complex problems of modern life to puzzle them, suspend their judgment so little and are so eager for action only because they have inherited from the earlier, simpler, and more violent ages an excessive predisposition to action, unsuited to our epoch and dangerous to our future development. But it was Clough, I think, who first stirred in Bagehot's mind this great dread of "the ruinous force of the will"; a phrase he was never weary of quoting, and which might almost be taken as the motto of his "Physics and Politics," the great conclusion of which is that in the "age of discussion," grand policies and high-handed diplomacy and sensational legislation of all kinds will become rarer and

Digitized by Google

rarer, because discussion will point out all the difficulties of such policies in relation to a state of existence so complex as our own, and will in this way tend to repress the excess of practical energy handed down to us by ancestors to whom life was a sharper, simpler, and more perilous affair.

But the time for Bagehot's full adoption of the suspensive principle in public affairs was not yet. In 1851 he went to Paris, shortly before the *Coup d'État*. And while all England was assailing Louis Napoleon (justly enough, as I think) for his perfidy and his impatience of the self-willed Assembly he could not control, Bagehot was preparing a deliberate and very masterly defence of that bloody and high-handed act. Even Bagehot would, I think, if pressed judiciously in later life, have admitted — though I can't say he ever *did* — that the *Coup d'État* was one of the best illustrations of "the ruinous force of the will" in engendering, or at least crystallizing, a false intellectual conclusion as to the political possibilities of the future, which recent history could produce. Certainly he always spoke somewhat apologetically of these early letters, though I never heard him expressly retract their doctrine. In 1851 a knot of young Unitarians (of whom I was then one)—headed by the late Mr. J. Langton Sanford, afterwards the historian of the Great Rebellion, who survived Bagehot barely four months—had engaged to help for a time in conducting the *Inquirer*, which then was, and still is, the chief literary and theological organ of the Unitarian body. Our *régime* was, I imagine, a time of great desolation for the very tolerant and thoughtful constituency for whom we wrote; and many of them, I am confident, yearned and were fully justified in yearning for those better days when this tyranny of ours should be overpast. Sanford and Osler did a good deal to throw cold water on the rather optimist and philanthropic politics of the most sanguine, because the most benevolent and open-hearted, of Dissenters; Roscoe criticized their literary work from the point of view of a devotee of the Elizabethan poets; and I attempted to prove to them in distinct heads, first, that their laity ought to have the protection afforded by a liturgy against the arbitrary prayers of their ministers, and next, that at least the great majority of their sermons ought to be suppressed, and the habit of delivering them discontinued almost altogether. Only a denomination of "just men" trained in tolerance for generations, and in that respect at least made all but "perfect," would have endured it at all; but I doubt if any of us caused the Unitarian body so much grief as Bagehot, who never was a Unitarian, but who contributed a series of brilliant letters on the *Coup d'État*, in which he trod just as heavily on the toes

Digitized by Google

of his colleagues as he did on those of the public by whom the *Inquirer* was taken. In those letters he not only, as I have already shown, eulogized the Catholic Church, but he supported the Prince-President's military violence, attacked the freedom of the press in France, maintained that the country was wholly unfit for true parliamentary government, and — worst of all, perhaps — insinuated a panegyric on Louis Napoleon himself, asserting that he had been far better prepared for the duties of a statesman by gambling on the turf than he would have been by poring over the historical and political dissertations of the wise and the good. This was Bagehot's day of cynicism. The seven letters which he wrote on the *Coup d'État* were certainly very exasperating; and yet they were not caricatures of his real thought, for his private letters at the time were more cynical still. Crabb Robinson, in speaking of him, used ever afterwards to describe him to me as "that friend of yours — you know whom I mean, you rascal! — who wrote those abominable, those most disgraceful letters on the *Coup d'État* — I did not forgive him for years after." Nor do I wonder even now that a sincere friend of constitutional freedom and intellectual liberty, like Crabb Robinson, found them difficult to forgive. They were light and airy, and even flippant, on a very grave subject. They made nothing of the Prince's perjury; and they took impertinent liberties with all the dearest prepossessions of the readers of the *Inquirer*, and assumed their sympathy just where Bagehot knew that they would be most revolted by his opinions. Nevertheless, they had a vast deal of truth in them, and no end of ability; and I hope that there will be many to read them with interest now that they are here republished. There is a good deal of the raw material of history in them, and certainly I doubt if Bagehot ever again hit the satiric vein of argument so well. Here is a passage that will bear taking out of its context, and therefore not so full of the shrewd malice of these letters as many others, but which will illustrate their ability. It is one in which Bagehot maintained for the first time the view (which I believe he subsequently almost persuaded English politicians to accept, though in 1852 it was a mere flippant novelty, a paradox and a heresy) that free institutions are apt to succeed with a stupid people, and to founder with a ready-witted and vivacious one. After broaching this, he goes on:

"I see you are surprised; you are going to say to me, as Socrates did to Polus, 'My young friend, *of course* you are right; but will you explain what you mean? as yet you are not intelligible.' I will do so as well as I can, and endeavor to make good what I say, not by an *a priori* demonstration of my own, but from the details of the present and the facts of history.

Digitized by Google

Not to begin by wounding any present susceptibilities, let me take the Roman character; for with one great exception — I need not say to whom I allude — they are the great political people of history. Now, is not a certain dullness their most visible characteristic? What is the history of their speculative mind? a blank; what their literature? a copy. They have left not a single discovery in any abstract science, not a single perfect or well-formed work of high imagination. The Greeks, the perfection of human and accomplished genius, bequeathed to mankind the ideal forms of self-idolizing art, the Romans imitated and admired; the Greeks explained the laws of nature, the Romans wondered and despised; the Greeks invented a system of numerals second only to that now in use, the Romans counted to the end of their days with the clumsy apparatus which we still call by their name; the Greeks made a capital and scientific calendar, the Romans began their month when the Pontifex Maximus happened to spy out the new moon. Throughout Latin literature, this is the perpetual puzzle: — Why are we free and they slaves, we prætors and they barbers? why do the stupid people always win and the clever people always lose? I need not say that in real sound stupidity, the English people are unrivaled: you'll hear more wit and better wit in an Irish street row than would keep Westminster Hall in humor for five weeks. . . . These valuable truths are no discoveries of mine: they are familiar enough to people whose business it is to know them. Hear what a douce and aged attorney says of your peculiarly promising barrister: — "Sharp? Oh yes, yes! he's too sharp by half. He is not *safe*, not a minute, isn't that young man." — "What style, sir," asked of an East India Director some youthful aspirant for literary renown, "is most to be preferred in the composition of official dispatches?" "My good fellow," responded the ruler of Hindostan, "the style *as we* like is the Humdrum.'"

The permanent value of these papers is due to the freshness of their impressions of the French capital, and their true criticisms of Parisian journalism and society. Their perverseness consists in this, — that Bagehot steadily ignored in them the distinction between the duty of resisting anarchy, and the assumption of the Prince-President that this could only be done by establishing his own dynasty and deferring *sine die* that great constitutional experiment which is now once more, no thanks to him or his government, on its trial; an experiment which, for anything we see, had at least as good a chance then as now, and under a firm and popular chief of the executive like Prince Louis, would probably have had a better chance then than it has now under MacMahon. I need hardly say that in later life Bagehot was by no means blind to the political shortcomings of Louis Napoleon's *régime*, as the article republished from the *Economist*, in the second appendix to this volume,* sufficiently proves. Moreover, he rejoiced heartily in the moderation

* "A Later Judgment," close of Vol. ii. of this edition.

Digitized by Google

of the republican statesmen during the severe trials of the months which just preceded his own death, in 1877, and expressed his sincere belief — confirmed by the history of the last year and a half — that the existing Republic had every prospect of life and growth.

During ~~that residence in Paris, Bagehot — though,~~ ~~as I have~~ said, in a somewhat cynical frame of mind — was full of life and courage, and was beginning to feel his own genius; ~~which~~ perhaps accounts ~~for the~~ air of recklessness so foreign to ~~him, which~~ he never adopted either before or since. During the riots he was a good deal in the streets, and from a mere love of art helped the Parisians to construct some of their barricades, notwithstanding the fact that his own sympathy was with those who shot down the barricades, not with those who ~~manned them~~. ~~He~~ climbed over the rails of the Palais Royal on the morning of Dec. 2 to breakfast, and used to say that he was the only person who did breakfast there on that day. Victor Hugo is certainly wrong in asserting that no one expected Louis Napoleon to use force, and that the streets were as full as usual when the people were shot down; for the gates of the Palais Royal were shut quite early in the day. Bagehot was very much struck by the ferocious look of the Montagnards.

"Of late," he wrote to me, "I have been devoting my entire attention to the science of barricades, which I found amusing. They have systematized it in a way which is pleasing to the cultivated intellect. We had only one good day's fighting, and I naturally kept out of cannon-shot. But I took a quiet walk over the barricades in the morning, and superintended the construction of three with as much keenness as if I had been clerk of the works. You've seen lots, of course, at Berlin; but I should not think those Germans were up to a real Montagnard, who is the most horrible being to the eye I ever saw, — sallow, sincere, sour fanaticism, with grizzled mustaches, and a strong wish to shoot you rather than not. The Montagnards are a scarce commodity, the real race, — only three or four, if so many, to a barricade. If you want a Satan any odd time, they'll do; only I hope that *he* don't believe in human brotherhood. It is not possible to respect any one who does, and I should be loth to confound the notion of *our* friend's solitary grandeur by supposing him to fraternize," etc. "I think M. Buonaparte is entitled to great praise. He has very good heels to his boots, and the French just want treading down, and nothing else, — calm, cruel, business-like oppression, to take the dogmatic conceit out of their heads. The spirit of generalization which, John Mill tells us, honorably distinguishes the French mind, has come to this, that every Parisian wants his head *tapped* in order to get the formulæ and nonsense out of it. And it would pay to perform the operation, for they are very clever on what is within the limit of their experience, and all that can be 'expanded' in terms of it; but beyond, it is all generalization and folly. . . . So I am for any carnivorous government."

Digitized by Google

And again, in the same letter: —

"Till the Revolution came I had no end of trouble to find conversation, but now they'll talk against everybody, and against the President like mad; and they talk immensely well, and the language is like a razor, — capital if you are skillful, but sure to cut you if you aren't. A fellow can talk German in crude forms, and I don't see it sounds any worse; but this stuff is horrid unless you get it *quite* right. A French lady made a striking remark to me: — '*C'est une révolution qui a sauvé la France. Tous mes amis sont mis en prison.*'* She was immensely delighted that such a pleasing way of saving her country had been found."

Of course the style of these familiar private letters conveys a gross caricature not only of Bagehot's maturer mind, but even of the judgment of the published letters; and I quote them only to show that at the time when he composed these letters on the *Coup d'État*, Bagehot's mood was that transient mood of reckless youthful cynicism through which so many men of genius pass. I do not think he had at any time any keen sympathy with the multitude, — *i. e.*, with masses of unknown men. And that he ever felt what has since then been termed "the enthusiasm of humanity," the sympathy with "the toiling millions of men sunk in labor and pain," he himself would strenuously have denied. Such sympathy, even when men really desire to feel it, is indeed very much oftener coveted than actually felt by men as a living motive; and I am not quite sure that Bagehot would have even wished to feel it. Nevertheless, he had not the faintest trace of real hardness about him towards people whom he knew and understood. He could not bear to give pain; and when in rare cases, by youthful inadvertence, he gave it needlessly, I have seen how much and what lasting vexation it caused him. Indeed, he was capable of great sacrifices to spare his friends but a little suffering.

It was, I think, during his stay in Paris that Bagehot finally decided to give up the notion of practicing at the bar, and to join his father in the Somersetshire Bank and in his other business as a merchant and ship-owner. This involved frequent visits to London and Liverpool; and Bagehot soon began to take a genuine interest in the larger issues of commerce, and maintained to the end that "business is much more amusing than pleasure." Nevertheless, he could not live without the intellectual life of London, and never stayed more than six weeks at a time in the country without finding some excuse for going to town; and long before his death he made his home there. Hunting was the only sport he really cared for. He was a dashing rider, and a fresh wind was

* "It is a revolution which has saved France. All my friends have been sent to prison."

Digitized by Google

felt blowing through his earlier literary efforts, as though he had been thinking in the saddle; an effect wanting in his later essays, where you see chiefly the calm analysis of a lucid observer. But most of the ordinary amusements of young people he detested. He used to say that he wished he could think balls *wicked*, being so stupid as they were, and all "the little blue and pink girls, so like each other," — a sentiment partly due, perhaps, to his extreme shortness of sight.

Though Bagehot never doubted the wisdom of his own decision to give up the law for the life of commerce, he thoroughly enjoyed his legal studies in his friend the late Mr. Justice Quain's chambers, and in those of the present Vice-Chancellor Sir Charles Hall; and he learnt there a good deal that was of great use to him in later life. Moreover, in spite of his large capacity for finance and commerce, there were small difficulties in Bagehot's way as a banker and merchant which he felt somewhat keenly. He was always absent-minded about *minutiæ*. For instance, to the last, he could not correct a proof well, and was sure to leave a number of small inaccuracies, harshnesses, and slipshodnesses in style uncorrected. He declared at one time that he was wholly unable to "add up," and in his mathematical exercises in college he had habitually been inaccurate in trifles. I remember Professor Malden, on returning one of his Greek exercises, saying to him, with that curiously precise and emphatic articulation which made every remark of his go so much farther than that of our other lecturers, "Mr. Bagehot, you wage an internecine war with your aspirates," — not meaning, of course, that he ever left them out in pronunciation, but that he neglected to put them in in his written Greek. And to the last, even in his printed Greek quotations, the slips of this kind were always numerous. This habitual difficulty — due, I believe, to a preoccupied imagination — in attending to small details made a banker's duties seem irksome and formidable to him at first; and even to the last, in his most effective financial papers, he would generally get some one else to look after the precise figures for him. But in spite of all this, and in spite of a real attraction for the study of law, he was sure that his head would not stand the hot courts, and [the] heavy wigs which make the hot courts hotter, or the night-work of a thriving barrister in case of success; and he was certainly quite right. Indeed, had he chosen the bar, he would have had no leisure for those two or three remarkable books which have made his reputation, — books which have been already translated into all the literary and some of the unliterary languages of Europe, and two of which are, I believe, used as

Digitized by Google

text-books in some of the American colleges.* Moreover, in all probability, his life would have been much shorter into the bargain. Soon after his return from Paris he devoted himself in earnest to banking and commerce, and also began that series of articles, first for the *Prospective* and then for the *National Review* (which latter periodical he edited in conjunction with me for several years), the most striking of which he republished in 1858, under the awkward and almost forbidding title of "Estimates of some Englishmen and Scotchmen," — a book which never attracted the attention it deserved, and which has been long out of print. In republishing most of these essays as I am now doing, — and a later volume may, I hope, contain those essays on statesmen and politicians which are for the present omitted from these,† — it is perhaps only fair to say that Bagehot in later life used to speak ill — much too ill — of his own early style. He used to declare that his early style affected him like "the jogging of a cart without springs over a very rough road," and no doubt in his earliest essays something abrupt and spasmodic may easily be detected; still, this was all so inextricably mingled with flashes of insight and humor which could ill be spared, that I always protested against any notion of so revising the essays as to pare down their excrescences.

I have never understood the comparative failure of this volume of Bagehot's early essays; and a comparative failure it was, though I do not deny that even at the time, it attracted much attention among the most accomplished writers of the day, and that I have been urged to republish it, as I am now doing, by many of the ablest men of my acquaintance. Obviously, as I have admitted, there are many faults of workmanship in it: now and then the banter is forced; often enough the style is embarrassed; occasionally, perhaps, the criticism misses its mark, or is over-refined: but taken as a whole, I hardly know any book that is such good reading, — that has so much lucid vision in it, so much shrewd and curious knowledge of the world, so sober a judgment and so dashing a humor combined. Take this, for instance, out of the paper on "The First Edinburgh Reviewers," concerning the judgment passed by Lord Jeffrey on the poetry of Bagehot's favorite poet, Wordsworth: —

"The world has given judgment. Both Mr. Wordsworth and Lord Jeffrey have received their rewards. The one has his own generation, the laughter of men, the applause of drawing-rooms, the concurrence of the crowd; the

*Since the first edition of this work was published, the Oxford Board of Studies have made a text-book of Mr. Bagehot's "English Constitution" for that university, and that of Cambridge of his "Economic Studies." — R. H. H.

†"Biographical Studies," Vol. iii. of this edition.

Digitized by Google

other a succeeding age, the fond enthusiasm of secret students, the lonely rapture of lonely minds. And each has received according to his kind. If all cultivated men speak differently because of the existence of Wordsworth and Coleridge; if not a thoughtful English book has appeared for years without some trace, for good or for evil, of their influence; if sermon writers subsist upon their thoughts; if 'sacred' poets thrive by translating their weaker portions into the speech of women; if, when all this is over, some sufficient part of their writing will ever be fitting food for wild musing and solitary meditation, — surely this is because they possessed the inner nature, an 'intense and glowing mind,' 'the vision and the faculty divine.' But if perchance, in their weaker moments the great authors of the 'Lyrical Ballads' did ever imagine that the world was to pause because of their verses, that 'Peter Bell' would be popular in drawing-rooms, that 'Christabel' would be perused in the City, that people of fashion would make a handbook of the 'Excursion,' it was well for them to be told at once that it was not so. Nature ingeniously prepared a shrill artificial voice, which spoke in season and out of season, enough and more than enough, what will ever be the idea of the cities of the plain concerning those who live alone among the mountains; of the frivolous concerning the grave; of the gregarious concerning the recluse; of those who laugh concerning those who laugh not; of the common concerning the uncommon; of those who lend on usury concerning those who lend not; the notions of the world, of those whom it will not reckon among the righteous. It said, 'This won't do.' And so in all times will the lovers of polished Liberalism speak concerning the intense and lonely prophet."

I choose that passage because it illustrates so perfectly Bagehot's double vein, — his sympathy with the works of high imagination, and his clear insight into that busy life which does not and cannot take note of works of high imagination, and which would not do the work it does if it could. And this is the characteristic of all the essays. How admirably, for instance, in his essay on Shakespeare, does he draw out the individuality of a poet who is generally supposed to be so completely hidden in his plays; and with how keen a satisfaction does he discern and display the prosperous and practical man in Shakespeare, — the qualities which made him a man of substance and a Conservative politician, as well as the qualities which made him a great dramatist and a great dreamer. No doubt Bagehot had a strong personal sympathy with the double life. Somersetshire probably never believed that the imaginative student, the omnivorous reader, could prosper as a banker and a man of business; and it was a satisfaction to him to show that he understood the world far better than the world had ever understood him. Again, how delicate is his delineation of Hartley Coleridge; how firm and clear his study of Sir Robert Peel; and how graphically he paints the literary pageant of Gibbon's tame but splendid genius! Certainly the literary taste of England never

Digitized by Google

made a greater blunder than when it passed by this remarkable volume of essays with comparatively little notice.

In 1858 Bagehot married the eldest daughter of the Right Hon. James Wilson, who died two years later in India, whither he had gone, as the financial member of the Indian Council, to reduce to some extent the financial anarchy which then prevailed there. This marriage gave Bagehot nineteen years of undisturbed happiness, and certainly led to the production of his most popular and original, if not in every respect his most brilliant books. It connected him with the higher world of politics, without which he would hardly have studied and written as he did on the English Constitution; and by making him the editor of the *Economist*, it compelled him to give his whole mind as much to the theoretic side of commerce and finance as his own duties had already compelled him to give it to the practical side. But when I speak of his marriage as the last impulse which determined his chief work in life, I do not forget that he had long been prepared both for political and for financial speculation by his early education. His father, a man of firm and deliberate political convictions, had taken a very keen interest in the agitation for the great Reform Bill of 1832, and had materially helped to return a Liberal member for his county after it passed. Probably no one in all England knew the political history of the country since the Peace more accurately than he: Bagehot often said that when he wanted any detail concerning the English political history of the last half-century, he had only to ask his father to obtain it. His uncle, Mr. Vincent Stuckey, too, was a man of the world, and his house in Langport was a focus of many interests during Bagehot's boyhood. Mr. Stuckey had begun life at the Treasury, and was at one time private secretary to Mr. Huskisson; and when he gave up that career to take a leading share in the Somersetshire Bank, he kept up for a long time his house in London and his relations with political society there. He was fond of his nephew, as was Bagehot of him; and there was always a large field of interests, and often there were men of eminence, to be found in his house. Thus Bagehot had been early prepared for the wider field of political and financial thought to which he gave up so much of his time after his marriage.

I need not say nearly as much on this later aspect of Bagehot's life as I have done on its early and more purely literary aspects, because his services in this direction are already well appreciated by the public. But this I should like to point out, — that he could never have written as he did on the English Constitution without having acutely studied living statesmen and their ways of acting

Digitized by Google

on each other; that his book was essentially the book of a most realistic, because a most vividly imaginative, observer of the actual world of politics, — the book of a man who was not blinded by habit and use to the enormous difficulties in the way of "government by public meeting," and to the secret of the various means by which in practice those difficulties had been attenuated or surmounted. It is the book of a meditative man who had mused much on the strange workings of human instincts, no less than of a quick observer who had seen much of external life. Had he not studied the men before he studied the institutions, had he not concerned himself with individual statesmen before he turned his attention to the mechanism of our parliamentary system, he could never have written on his book "The English Constitution."

I think the same may be said of his book on "Physics and Politics," a book in which I find new force and depth every time I take it up afresh. It is true that Bagehot had a keen sympathy with natural science, that he devoured all Mr. Darwin's and Mr. Wallace's books, and many of a much more technical kind, — as for example Professor Huxley's on the "Principles of Physiology," — and grasped the leading ideas contained in them with a firmness and precision that left nothing to be desired. But after all, "Physics and Politics" could never have been written without that sort of living insight into man which was the life of all his earlier essays. The notion that a "cake of custom" — of rigid, inviolable law — was the first requisite for a strong human society, and that the very cause which was thus essential for the *first* step of progress, the step towards unity, was the great danger of the second step, the step out of uniformity, and was the secret of all arrested and petrified civilizations, like the Chinese, is an idea which first germinated in Bagehot's mind at the time he was writing his cynical letters from Paris about stupidity being the first requisite of a political people; though I admit, of course, that it could not have borne the fruit it did, without Mr. Darwin's conception of a natural selection through conflict to help it on. Such passages as the following could evidently never have been written by a mere student of Darwinian literature, nor without the trained imagination exhibited in Bagehot's literary essays: —

"No one will ever comprehend the arrested civilizations unless he sees the strict dilemma of early society. Either men had no law at all, and lived in confused tribes hardly hanging together, or they had to obtain a fixed law by processes of incredible difficulty; those who surmounted that difficulty soon destroyed all those that lay in their way who did not — and then they themselves were caught in their own yoke. The customary discipline,

Digitized by Google

which could only be imposed on any early men by terrible sanctions, continued with those sanctions, and killed out of the whole society the propensities to variation which are the principle of progress. Experience shows how incredibly difficult it is to get men really to encourage the principle of originality;"*

and as Bagehot held, for a very good reason; namely, that without a long accumulated and inherited tendency to discourage originality, society would never have gained the cohesion requisite for effective common action against its external foes. No one, I think, who had not studied as Bagehot had, in actual life, first the vast and unreasoning conservatism of politically strong societies like that of rural England, and next the perilous mobility and impressibility of politically weak societies like that of Paris, would ever have seen as he did the close connection of these ideas with Mr. Darwin's principle of natural selection by conflict. And here I may mention, by way of illustrating this point, that Bagehot delighted in observing and expounding the bovine slowness of rural England in acquiring a new idea. Somersetshire, he used to boast, would not subscribe £1,000 "to be represented by an archangel"; and in one letter which I received from him during the Crimean war, he narrated with great gusto an instance of the tenacity with which a Somersetshire rustic stuck to his own notion of what was involved in conquering an enemy. "The Somersetshire view," he wrote, "of the chance of bringing the war to a successful conclusion is as follows: — *Countryman:* 'How old, zir, be the Zar?' *Myself:* 'About sixty-three.' *Countryman:* 'Well, now, I can't think however they be to take he. They do tell I that Rooshia is a very big place, and if he doo goo right into the middle of 'n, you could not take he, not nohow.' I talked till the train came (it was at a station), and endeavored to show how the war might be finished without capturing the Czar, but I fear without effect. At last he said, 'Well, zir, I hope, *as you do say, zir*, we shall take he,' as I got into the carriage." It is clear that the humorous delight which Bagehot took in this tenacity and density of rural conceptions was partly the cause of the attention which he paid to the subject. No doubt there was in him a vein of purely instinctive sympathy with this density, for intellectually he could not even have understood it. Writing on the intolerable and fatiguing cleverness of French journals, he describes in one of his Paris letters the true enjoyment he felt in reading a thoroughly stupid article in the *Herald* (a Tory paper now no more); and I believe he was quite sincere. It was, I imagine, a real pleasure to him to be able to

* "Physics and Politics," pages 467, 468.

Digitized by Google

preach in his last general work that a "cake of custom," just sufficiently stiff to make innovation of any kind very difficult, but not quite stiff enough to make it impossible, is the true condition of durable progress.

The coolness of his judgment, and his power of seeing both sides of a question, undoubtedly gave Bagehot's political opinions considerable weight with both parties, and I am quite aware that a great majority of the ablest political thinkers of the time would disagree with me when I say that, personally, I do not rate Bagehot's sagacity as a practical politician nearly so highly as I rate his wise analysis of the growth and *rationale* of political institutions. Everything he wrote on the politics of the day was instructive, but — to my mind at least — seldom decisive; and as I thought, often not true. He did not feel, and avowed that he did not feel, much sympathy with the masses; and he attached far too much relative importance to the refinement of the governing classes. That, no doubt, is most desirable, if you can combine it with a genuine consideration for the interests of "the toiling millions of men sunk in labor and pain": but experience, I think, sufficiently shows that they are often, perhaps even generally, incompatible; and that democratic governments of very low tone may consult more adequately the leading interests of the "dim common populations" than aristocratic governments of very high caliber. Bagehot hardly admitted this, and always seemed to me to think far more of the intellectual and moral tone of governments than he did of the intellectual and moral interests of the people governed.

Again, those who felt most profoundly Bagehot's influence as a political thinker would probably agree with me that it was his leading idea in politics to discourage anything like too much action of any kind, legislative or administrative, and most of all anything like an ambitious colonial or foreign policy. This was not owing to any doctrinaire adhesion to the principle of *laissez-faire*. He supported — hesitatingly, no doubt, but in the end decidedly — the Irish Land Bill; and never belonged to that straitest sect of the economists who decry, as contrary to the laws of economy and little short of a crime, the intervention of government in matters which the conflict of individual self-interests might possibly be trusted to determine. It was from a very different point of view that he was so anxious to deprecate ambitious policies, and curb the practical energies of the most energetic of peoples. Next to Clough, I think that Sir George Cornewall Lewis had the most powerful influence over him in relation to political principles. There has been no statesman in our time whom he liked so much

Digitized by Google

or regretted so deeply; and he followed him most of all in deprecating the greater part of what is called political *energy*. Bagehot held with Sir George Lewis that men in modern days do a great deal too much; that half the public actions and a great many of the private actions of men had better never been done; that modern statesmen and modern peoples are far too willing to burden themselves with responsibilities. He held, too, that men have not yet sufficiently verified the principles on which action ought to proceed; and that till they have done so, it would be better far to act less. Lord Melbourne's habitual query, "Can't you let it alone?" seemed to him, as regarded all new responsibilities, the wisest of hints for our time. He would have been glad to find a fair excuse for giving up India, for throwing the colonies on their own resources, and for persuading the English people to accept deliberately the place of a fourth or fifth-rate European power; which was not in his estimation a cynical or unpatriotic wish, but quite the reverse, — for he thought that such a course would result in generally raising the caliber of the national mind, conscience, and taste. In his "Physics and Politics" he urges generally, as I have before pointed out, that the practical energy of existing peoples in the West is far in advance of the knowledge that would enable them to turn that energy to good account. He wanted to see the English a more leisurely race, taking more time to consider all their actions, and suspending their decisions on all great policies and enterprises till either these were well matured, or — as he expected it to be in the great majority of cases — the opportunity for sensational action was gone by. He quotes from Clough what really might have been taken as the motto of his own political creed: —

> "Old things need not be therefore true,
> O brother man, nor yet the new;
> Ah, still awhile the old thought retain,
> And yet consider it again."

And in all this, if it were advanced rather as a principle of education than as a principle of political practice, there would be great force; but when he applied this teaching, not to the individual but to the state, not to encourage the gradual formation of a new type of character but to warn the nation back from a multitude of practical duties of a simple though arduous kind, such as those for example which we have undertaken in India, — duties the value of which, performed even as they are, could hardly be overrated, if only because they involve so few debatable and doubtful assumptions, and are only the elementary tasks of the hewers of wood and drawers of water for the civilization of the future, —

Digitized by Google

I think Bagehot made the mistake of attaching far too little value to the moral instincts of a sagacious people, and too much to the refined deductions of a singularly subtle intellect. I suspect that the real effect of suddenly stopping the various safety valves, by which the spare energy of our nation is diverted to the useful work of roughly civilizing other lands, would be, not to stimulate the deliberative understanding of the English people, but to stunt its thinking as well as its acting powers, and render it more frivolous and more vacant-minded than it is.

In the field of economy there are so many thinkers who are far better judges of Bagehot's invaluable work than myself that I will say a very few words indeed upon it. It is curious, but I believe it to be almost universally true, that what may be called the primitive impulse of all economic *action* is generally also strong in great economic *thinkers* and financiers; I mean the saving, or at least the anti-spending, instinct. It is very difficult to see why it should be so, but I think it *is* so. No one was more large-minded in his view of finance than Bagehot. He preached that in the case of a rich country like England, efficiency was vastly more important than the mere reduction of expenditure, and held that Mr. Gladstone and other great Chancellors of the Exchequer made a great deal too much of saving for saving's sake. None the less, he himself had the anti-spending instinct in some strength; and he was evidently pleased to note its existence in his favorite economic thinker, Ricardo. Generous as Bagehot was, — and no one ever hesitated less about giving largely for an adequate end, — he always told me, even in boyhood, that spending was disagreeable to him, and that it took something of an effort to pay away money. In a letter before me, he tells his correspondent of the marriage of an acquaintance, and adds that the lady is a Dissenter, "and therefore probably rich. Dissenters don't spend, *and quite right too.*" I suppose it takes some feeling of this kind to give the intellect of a man of high capacity that impulse towards the study of the laws of the increase of wealth, without which men of any imagination would be more likely to turn in other directions.

Nevertheless, even as an economist, Bagehot's most original writing was due less to his deductions from the fundamental axioms of the modern science than to that deep insight into men which he had gained in many different fields. The essays* published in the *Fortnightly Review* for February and May, 1876, — in which he showed so powerfully how few of the conditions of the science known to us as "political economy" have ever been really

* "The Postulates of Political Economy."

Digitized by Google

applicable to any large portion of the globe during the longest periods of human history, — furnish quite an original study in social history and in human nature. His striking book "Lombard Street" is quite as much a study of bankers and bill-brokers as of the principles of banking. Take, again, Bagehot's view of the intellectual position and value of the capitalist classes. Every one who knows his writings in the *Economist* knows how he ridiculed the common impression that the chief service of the capitalist class — that by which they *earn* their profits — is merely what the late Mr. Senior used to call "abstinence," — that is, the practice of deferring their enjoyment of their savings in order that those savings may multiply themselves; and knows, too, how inadequate he thought it merely to add that when capitalists are themselves managers, they discharge the task of "superintending labor" as well. Bagehot held that the capitalists of a commercial country do not merely the saving, and the work of foremen in superintending labor, but all the difficult intellectual work of commerce besides; and are so little appreciated as they are chiefly because they are a dumb class, who are seldom equal to explaining to others the complex processes by which they estimate the wants of the community and conceive how best to supply them. He maintained that capitalists are the great generals of commerce; that they plan its whole strategy, determine its tactics, direct its commissariat, and incur the danger of great defeats, as well as earn — if they do not always gain — the credit of great victories. Here again is a new illustration of the light which Bagehot's keen insight into men, taken in connection with his own intimate understanding of the commercial field, brought into his economic studies.

He brought life into these dry subjects from almost every side. For instance, in writing to the *Spectator*, many years ago, about the cliff scenery of Cornwall, and especially about the petty harbor of Boscastle, with its fierce sea, and its two breakwaters which leave a mere "Temple Bar" for the ships to get in at, — a harbor of which he says that "the principal harbor of Lilliput probably had just this look," — he goes back in imagination at once to the condition of the country at the time when a great number of such petty harbors as these were essential to such trade as there was; and shows that at that time the Liverpool and London docks not only could not have been built for want of money, but would have been of no use if they had been built, since the auxiliary facilities which alone make such emporia useful did not exist. "Our old gentry built on their own estates as they could; and if their estates were near some wretched little haven, they were much

Digitized by Google

pleased. The sea was the railway of those days. It brought, as it did to Ellangowan in Dirk Hatteraick's* time, brandy for the men and pinners for the women, to the loneliest of coast castles." It was by such vivid illustrations as this, of the conditions of a very different commercial life from our own, that Bagehot lit up the "dismal science," till in his hands it became both picturesque and amusing.

Bagehot made two or three efforts to get into Parliament; but after an illness which he had in 1868, he deliberately abandoned the attempt, and held (I believe rightly) that his political judgment was all the sounder, as well as his health the better, for a quieter life. Indeed, he used to say of himself that it would be very difficult for him to find a borough which would be willing to elect him its representative, because he was "between sizes in politics." Nevertheless, in 1866 he was very nearly elected for Bridgewater, but was by no means pleased that he was so near success; for he stood to lose, not to win, in the hope that if he and his party were really quite pure, he might gain the seat on petition. He did his very best, indeed, to secure purity, though he failed. As a speaker he did not often succeed, — his voice had no great compass, and his manner was somewhat odd to ordinary hearers; but at Bridgewater he was completely at his ease, and his canvass and public speeches were decided successes. His examination, too, before the commissioners sent down a year or two later to inquire into the corruption of Bridgewater, was itself a great success. He not only entirely defeated the somewhat eagerly pressed efforts of one of the commissioners, Mr. Anstey, to connect him with the bribery, but he drew a most amusing picture of the bribable electors whom he had seen only to shun. I will quote a little bit from the evidence he gave in reply to what Mr. Anstey probably regarded as home-thrusts : —

42,018 (*Mr. Anstey*). Speaking from your experience of those streets, when you went down them canvassing did any of the people say anything to you, or in your hearing, about money? — Yes, one I recollect standing at the door, who said, "I won't vote for gentlefolks unless they do something for I. Gentlefolks do not come to I unless they want something of I, and I won't do nothing for gentlefolks unless they do something for me." Of course I immediately retired out of that house.

42,019. That man did not give you his promise? — I retired immediately; he stood in the doorway sideways, as these rustics do.

42,020. Were there many such instances? — One or two, I remember. One suggested that I might have a place. I immediately retired from him.

*In "Guy Mannering."

Digitized by Google

42,021. Did anybody of a better class than those voters (privately, of course) expostulate with you against your resolution to be pure?—No, nobody ever came to me at all.

42,022. But those about you,—did any of them say anything of this kind: "Mr. Bagehot, you are quite wrong in putting purity of principles forward. It will not do if the other side bribes?"—I might have been told that I should be unsuccessful, in the stream of conversation; many people may have told me that; that is how I gathered that if the other side was impure and we were pure, I should be beaten.

42,023. Can you remember the names of any who told you that?—No, I cannot; but I dare say I was told by as many as twenty people, and we went upon that entire consideration.

To leave my subject without giving some idea of Bagehot's racy conversation would be a sin. He inherited this gift, I believe, in great measure from his mother, to whose stimulating teaching in early life he probably owed also a great deal of his rapidity of thought. A lady who knew him well says that one seldom asked him a question without his answer making you either think or laugh, or both think and laugh together; and this is the exact truth. His habitual phraseology was always vivid. He used to speak, for instance, of the minor people—the youths or admirers—who collect round a considerable man, as his 'fringe.' It was he who invented the phrase 'padding' to denote the secondary kind of article—not quite of the first merit, but with interest and value of its own—with which a judicious editor will fill up perhaps three-quarters of his review. If you asked him what he thought on a subject on which he did not happen to have read or thought at all, he would open his large eyes and say, "My mind is 'to let' on that subject,—pray tell me what to think;" though you soon found that this might be easier attempted than done. He used to say banteringly to his mother, by way of putting her off at a time when she was anxious for him to marry, "A man's mother is his misfortune, but his wife is his fault." He told me once, at a time when the *Spectator* had perhaps been somewhat more eager or sanguine on political matters than he approved, that he always got his wife to "break" it to him on the Saturday morning, as he found it too much for his nerves to encounter its views without preparation. Then his familiar antitheses not unfrequently reminded me of Dickens's best touches in that line. He writes to a friend, "Tell —— that his policies went down in the 'Colombo,' but were fished up again. *They are dirty, but valid.*' I remember asking him if he had enjoyed a particular dinner which he had rather expected to enjoy, but he replied, 'No, the sherry was bad; tasted as if L—— had dropped his *h's* into it.' His practical

Digitized by Google

illustrations, too, were full of wit. In his address to the Bridgewater constituency, on the occasion when he was defeated by eight votes, he criticized most happily the sort of bribery which ultimately resulted in the disfranchisement of the place: —

"I can make allowance," he said, "for the poor voter; he is most likely ill educated, certainly ill off, and a little money is a nice treat to him. What he does is wrong, but it is intelligible. What I do not understand is the position of the rich, respectable, virtuous members of a party which countenances these things. They are like the man who stole stinking fish: they commit a crime, and they get no benefit."

But perhaps the best illustration I can give of his more sardonic humor was his remark to a friend who had a church in the grounds near his house: — "Ah, you've got the church in the grounds! I like that. It's well the tenants shouldn't be *quite* sure that the landlord's power stops with this world." And his more humorous exaggerations were very happy. I remember his saying of a man who was excessively fastidious in rejecting underdone meat, that he once sent away a cinder "because it was red"; and he confided gravely to an early friend that when he was in low spirits, it cheered him to go down to the bank and dabble his hand in a heap of sovereigns. But his talk had finer qualities than any of these. One of his most intimate friends, — both in early life, and later in Lincoln's Inn, — Mr. T. Smith Osler, writes to me of it thus: —

"As an instrument for arriving at truth, I never knew anything like a talk with Bagehot. It had just the quality which the farmers desiderated in the claret, of which they complained that though it was very nice, it brought them 'no forrader'; for Bagehot's conversation did get you forward, and at a most amazing pace. Several ingredients went to this. The foremost was his power of getting to the heart of the subject, taking you miles beyond your starting-point in a sentence, generally by dint of sinking to a deeper stratum. The next was his instantaneous appreciation of the bearing of everything you yourself said; making talk with him, as Roscoe once remarked, 'like riding a horse with a perfect mouth.' But most unique of all was his power of keeping up animation without combat. I never knew a power of discussion, of co-operative investigation of truth, to approach to it. It was all stimulus, and yet no contest."

But I must have done; and indeed, it is next to impossible to convey, even faintly, the impression of Bagehot's vivid and pungent conversation to any one who did not know him. It was full of youth, and yet had all the wisdom of a mature judgment in it. The last time we met, only five days before his death, I remarked on the vigor and youthfulness of his look, and told him he looked less like a contemporary of my own than one of a younger

Digitized by Google

generation. In a pencil note, the last I received from him, written from bed on the next day but one, he said, "I think you must have had the evil eye when you complimented me on my appearance. Ever since, I have been sickening, and am now in bed with a severe attack on the lungs." Indeed, well as he appeared to me, he had long had delicate health, and heart disease was the immediate cause of death. In spite of a heavy cold on his chest, he went down to his father's for his Easter visit the day after I last saw him, and he passed away painlessly in sleep on March 24, 1877, aged 51. It was at Herds Hill — the pretty place west of the river Parret that flows past Langport, which his grandfather had made some fifty years before — that he breathed his last. He had been carried thither as an infant, to be present when the foundation stone was laid of the home which he was never to inherit; and now very few of his name survive. Bagehot's family is believed to be the only one remaining that has retained the old spelling of the name as it appears in Domesday Book, the modern form being Bagot. The Gloucestershire family of the same name, from whose stock they are supposed to have sprung, died out in the beginning of this century.

Not very many, perhaps, outside Bagehot's own inner circle, will carry about with them that hidden pain, that burden of emptiness, inseparable from an image which has hitherto been one full of the suggestions of life and power, when that life and power are no longer to be found; for he was intimately known only to the few. But those who do will hardly find again in this world a store of intellectual sympathy of so high a stamp, so wide in its range and so full of original and fresh suggestion; a judgment to lean on so real and so sincere; or a friend so frank and constant, with so vivid and tenacious a memory for the happy associations of a common past, and so generous in recognizing the independent value of divergent convictions in the less pliant present.

Digitized by Google

BAGEHOT AS AN ECONOMIST,*

BY ROBERT GIFFEN.

THE publication of these "Economic Studies," the incomplete fragments of a book on English political economy which Bagehot was engaged upon at the time of his death, suggests to me the task, I had almost said the duty, of endeavoring to estimate the position which he held as an economist and the service he has rendered to economic science. Readers of the present book will see at once the reason of this in Mr. Hutton's statement in the preface, that during the last years of Bagehot's life I "had a better knowledge of his economic mind than any other person." I should not like to claim for myself so much as this statement implies. Bagehot was not given to egotistical gossip about himself, or what he had done or meant to do; he left his works as they were completed to speak for themselves. To some extent I can only appreciate his finished work as it is open to all the world to appreciate it. But it was my happy fortune in the last nine years of his life, when his writing was mainly on economic subjects, to be intimately associated with him in the conduct of the *Economist* newspaper. During this period, accordingly, I had not only to discuss topics of political economy with him, especially the topics of banking and the money market, incessantly, but I had to know his mind so thoroughly on all leading subjects of the day as to be able to write in accordance with his views when he was himself at a distance. It will be my own fault, therefore, if I have not something to contribute towards a knowledge of his work; while the ability to do so constitutes a corresponding obligation, considering how important that work was: although, as I have said, I can pretend to little explicit knowledge, beyond what can be derived from the writings themselves, of what Bagehot thought or intended to accomplish.

I must claim, however, some indulgence in attempting the task I propose. I had only too little thought, whilst we were together, that such a task would ever devolve on me; and I should have

* Economic Studies. By the late Walter Bagehot. Edited by Richard Holt Hutton. London: Longmans. 1880.

Digitized by Google

accounted it almost a profanation to contemplate writing of so intimate a friend, and on this subject also in some degree a master. I am thus unable to remember much that I should like to recall. Nor can I lay any claim to experience in literary criticism, which would be so invaluable in writing of a man himself so perfect in this kind of work. If I can tell something which may afterwards help an expert critic in discussing Bagehot's position and work as an economist, I shall be satisfied with my success, however imperfect my own estimate may be. It will be generally agreed, I believe, that his labors were so important as to command an attempt like this, at whatever cost and risk to the writer himself.

I.

LET me do something at the outset to describe my own view of his leading characteristics and qualifications as a writer on economic subjects. Mr. Hutton has described so fully and perfectly what Bagehot was as a writer altogether, and this upon a basis of knowledge and intimacy which no other friend could possess, that all I can hope to say is by way of supplement; but Mr. Hutton has purposely left a blank in his description, and perhaps there is something to be added. So far as he goes, however, I can only echo what he has said in protest against the common idea of Bagehot as being primarily an economist, instead of his being primarily a man of letters of strong genius and imagination, who happened, amongst other things, and subordinate to other things viewing his literary life as a whole, to take up with "Political Economy." This point is so important in any description of Bagehot as an economist, and of the characteristic work he did, that I may quote *in extenso* what Mr. Hutton has said:—

"While of course it has given me great pleasure, as it must have given pleasure to all Bagehot's friends, to hear the Chancellor of the Exchequer's evidently genuine tribute to his financial sagacity in the Budget speech of 1877, and Lord Granville's eloquent acknowledgments of the value of Bagehot's political counsels as editor of the *Economist* in the speech delivered at the London University on May 9, 1877, I have sometimes felt somewhat unreasonably vexed that those who appreciated so well what I may almost call the smallest part of him appeared to know so little of the essence of him,—of the high-spirited, buoyant, subtle, speculative nature, in which the imaginative qualities were even more remarkable than the judgment, and were indeed at the root of all that was strongest in the judgment; of the gay and dashing humor which was the life of every conversation in which he joined; and of the visionary nature to which the commonest things often seemed the most marvelous, and the marvelous things the most intrinsically probable. To those who hear of Bagehot only as an original political economist and a lucid political thinker, a curiously false image of him

Digitized by Google

must be suggested. If they are among the multitude misled by Carlyle, who regard all political economists as 'the dreary professors of a dismal science,' they will probably conjure up an arid disquisitionist on value and cost of production; and even if assured of Bagehot's imaginative power, they may perhaps only understand by the expression that capacity for feverish preoccupation which makes the mention of 'Peel's Act' summon up to the faces of certain fanatics a hectic glow, or the rumor of paper currencies blanch others with the pallor of true passion. The truth, however, is, that the best qualities which Bagehot had, both as economist and as politician, were of a kind which the majority of economists and politicians do not specially possess. I do not mean that it was in any way an accident that he was an original thinker in either sphere; far from it. But I do think that what he brought to political and economical science he brought in some sense from *outside* their normal range, that the man of business and the financier in him fell within such sharp and well-defined limits that he knew better than most of his class where their special weakness lay, and where their special functions ended."

No one who drank even for a little of the champagne of Bagehot's wide discursive talk, full of humor and side lights on every subject he touched, will fail to appreciate this description. He was as far as possible from giving the idea of a man with a special genius for a subject and much absorbed in it. As far as my own experience goes, our business talks, though having for end and object the conduct of a political and business newspaper, always traveled much wider than the record. Not to speak of his interest in literature and philosophy, he had the keenest interest, for instance, in the essential differences of system between English and Scotch law and English and Scotch forms of local and judicial administration, a subject which grew out of some business topics in the beginning of our acquaintance; in the art of money-making, as distinguished from mere knowledge and skill in economics and the methods and subjects of business; in the working of personal motives of revenge and the like, as they affected the great game which was constantly playing before us in the City; similarly, in politics, in the personal element, the personal and family relationships of our public men, which he believed to have far more effect on the course of politics and parties, and the making or marring of careers, than the outside world supposes. I only mention a fragment of the things about which he was intellectually curious, and which were yet far enough away from the special subjects before us. Nothing of this will seem surprising to the editors and contributors of our leading journals, who know how necessary it is that the mind should play freely about many subjects to be able to choose properly a line upon any one subject; but Bagehot undoubtedly possessed the *quasi*-omniscience so necessary in the highest journalism

Digitized by Google

as well as the best literature in an unusual degree, and as such he could not be primarily an economist as the world understood him. He was something very much greater,—a thinker of some new ideas of great value in the science, and a describer of the modern world of business, which is so different from the world of business that existed only one or two generations ago, and which alone could be in the minds of earlier writers on political economy; and he was all this in part *because* the study of political economy formed only a portion of his intellectual interests.

Perhaps I may add, at the risk of saying something apparently tending to diminish his reputation, but which it seems absolutely necessary to say in order to make quite clear *how* he was great, that there was a disposition, among politicians especially, to defer to Bagehot as an economic authority on subjects where he had no claim to authority, and which were foreign to the special work he did. For reasons which will afterwards appear, he was not "first," I think, on currency or finance, or almost any of the dismal topics which are usually thought to be the main things in economic science. There could be no better practical adviser on such topics, and the advice was so good that people did not reflect on its being due to qualities which were outside the economic range; but he was not the authority, in the strict sense, which those who took the advice supposed. To give only one illustration of how he was wrongly deferred to: the other day a remark in one of his Silver essays respecting the fall in silver, to the effect that "so grave a misfortune has seldom happened to any government so suddenly and so completely from causes out of its control," was quoted by a rising member of the present government as conclusive of the singularity and magnitude of the evil of loss by exchange on which the Indian government is always dwelling. I doubt if the *obiter dicta* of authors any more than of judges are properly quotable in this way; they ought not to count unless they are material in the argument: and I am quite sure, if he had lived, Bagehot would have modified his judgment as to the loss of the Indian government, the statement of which he had been content at first to take from themselves. But what I wish to observe is, that Bagehot was no special authority on such a point at all, having neither the statistical nor financial knowledge at first sight necessary to form a judgment. The statement is palpably untrue. Every government that has had to submit to war and invasion has suffered far more from such causes than the Indian government from the fall in silver; and that government itself has suffered quite as much, if not more, from famines as it has really suffered from the fall in silver.

Digitized by Google

If Bagehot had had time to study the subject, and had had before him the evidence *pro* and *con* as to what the loss of the Indian government really is, his opinion would have been practically valuable, and probably a safe one to follow; but it would not have been so as that of an authority on the subject itself, forming a first-hand opinion upon it. His special province was something much greater, but at the same time entirely different.

While his wide imagination and various knowledge fitted Bagehot to be a discoverer and describer in the economic field, I would notice as a special quality his business imagination. He notes this as a quality of James Wilson, in language so felicitous that there is nothing more to be said in describing what is meant by this quality, though it was not in Bagehot, as he states it to have been in Wilson, a "predominating power." Still it was present so largely as to be most striking. What he says of Wilson is:—

"He had a great power of conceiving transactions. Political economy was to him the science of buying and selling; and of the ordinary bargains of men he had a very steady and distinct conception. In explaining such subjects he did not begin, as political economists have been wittily said to do, with 'Suppose a man upon an island,' but 'What they do in the City is this,' 'The real course of business is so and so. . . .' His 'business imagination' enabled him to see 'what men did' and 'why they did it;' 'why they ought to do it' and 'why they ought not to do it.'"

Political economy was certainly more to Bagehot than the science of buying and selling; but so far as it is concerned with buying and selling, he had all the power which he ascribes to James Wilson to understand it. Given a set of circumstances, no matter how novel, he would predict what the business man would do and what the net result of the operation would be. Most people will recollect how he predicted in his Silver essays that the fall in the exchange with India would stimulate exports from that country and check imports of goods into it, thus stimulating the import of silver—a prediction which was strikingly fulfilled. This was entirely the fruit of his "business imagination." He knew, as by an instinct, what the business man would do in the new circumstances; and "putting two and two together," he was able to predict the result as well. But the quality with Bagehot was not confined to a knowledge of what particular operations and their results would be. As I have said, he was deeply interested in the art of money-making, and he imagined vividly the entire mental state of business men. How profits were made in different trades —in a whole class, for instance, such as insurance and banking, by means of money being brought to those engaged in them, who required no capital of their own except by way of guarantee and

Digitized by Google

to obtain credit — was a constant study to him, as were the shifts and devices of the struggling and unsuccessful traders in all trades. The result is seen in every page almost of his writing. He is the very antithesis of the literary economists whom he describes as "like physiologists who have never dissected ; like astronomers who have never seen the stars." But the eye brings to a subject what it has the power of seeing; and there have been literary economists conversant with business and immersed in it as Bagehot was, whose eyes were blinded that they could not see.

Another feature I should like to put forward as characteristic of Bagehot was his "quantitative" sense — his knowledge and feeling of the "how much" in dealing with the complex working of economic tendencies. Much economic writing is abstract, and necessarily so. You can say, for instance, that import duties tend to diminish trade between countries, and that import duties on articles imported from abroad, the same kind of articles being produced at home, are peculiarly mischievous; or that fluctuating exchanges are injurious to trade. But in the concrete world there is something more to be done. Here the "how much" is very often the only vital question. Fluctuating exchanges may be injurious to trade, but then they may be more tolerable than the evils incidental to some remedial course you propose. Import duties may also have to be tolerated as less injurious or more practicable than some other form of taxation; and even import duties which are Protective may in given circumstances have to be submitted to, for the sake of revenue or to prevent the mischief of too sudden changes. In dealing with concrete things, then, and the applications of his science, the economist must know where to place his emphasis, — to be able to measure one evil against another and one force against another. And the sense necessary for this was Bagehot's in an unusual degree. This is conspicuously manifest in one of the discussions he was most interested in, — that of the bank reserve, which occupies so large a space in his "Lombard Street." The amount of that reserve, the kind of liabilities it has to meet as well as their amount, the nature and measure of the forces which may act on it and through it on the rate of discount, are all questions in which degree is everything, and which require much discussion in the concrete; although in the abstract it is so easy to say that bankers must keep an adequate reserve, and that rates of discount must rise when it is becoming inadequate, and fall when it is becoming redundant. But everywhere and always this quantitative sense was present when the discussion made it necessary. And the value of this quality cannot, I believe, be overestimated.

Digitized by Google

The most useful part of economic writing now requires the use of quantitative methods, or at least the appreciation of quantities. The effect of all economic changes or tendencies in the mass can only be appreciated quantitatively; and it is with the effect in the mass, not merely with tendencies in the abstract, that people are concerned. The abstract science was a necessary preliminary, but it is mainly a means to an end.

I do not mean by all this that the economist who weighs quantities should be himself a skilled manipulator of figures; although the power of manipulating them, and so dealing with evidence at first-hand, may be indispensable to the best authority on statistical and financial questions. Indeed, much of the interest for me in Bagehot's possession of this quantitative sense lies in the fact that one of the difficulties he had to contend with in life, as Mr. Hutton notices in his memoir, was a repugnance to minute detail, including an aversion to manipulate figures, all but amounting to inability to "add up." The petty detail which most people find easy enough was beyond measure irksome to him; and the irksomeness was aggravated, when I knew him, by weak eyesight. But columns of figures are not statistics, though they are the raw material of statisticians; and this Bagehot fully proved by his remarkable appreciation of the numerical element in economic problems, all the while he had these technical difficulties in his way. In this quality he was second to no statistician I have ever met, and infinitely superior to most. Though it is a less material point, I should like to add, for the sake of bringing out the true meaning and value of statistics, that irksome as the detail of figures was to him, and naturally also the detail of constructing statistical tables, he was a singularly good judge and critic of such tables and the results they brought out. He knew what tables could be made to say, and the value of simplicity in their construction. He had an intense dislike of that vice of almost all amateur statisticians, and not a few experts, the attempt to put too much into their tables. He likewise laid down a rule which I have found invaluable for the preparation of all accounts and statistical tables: that after you have had the most accurate clerks to do them, you should not "pass" them without having them examined by an expert in the subject, who would be able, if there was occasion, to detect something substantially and flagrantly wrong which had escaped the notice of the mechanical compilers. Thus he was not a statistician in the technical sense, perhaps, and so could not be the authority on some subjects he was sometimes supposed to be; but he possessed the essential qualifications for dealing with and

Digitized by Google

reflecting on statistical data when they came in his way, and a sufficient sense of quantity to lean upon and to guide him in his own studies and writing.

Every writer has the defect of his qualities; and I should say that Bagehot, while possessing the inventive and imaginative mind, which enabled him to discover and to describe so clearly, did not excel either in that labored ratiocination or minute analysis which are essential to the highest success in some branches of economic study. He could both sustain a long argument and analyze minutely; whatever he had to do he did thoroughly, and took what pains were necessary,—in some cases he had conspicuously that transcendent capacity for taking trouble which Carlyle describes as the quality of genius: still, it did not "come natural" to him to do either of these things, and he was not here conspicuously successful. If the reader will compare Chapters 12 and 13 of his essays on Silver with the "Lombard Street," or even the essay on the "Cost of Production" in the present volume with the first essay on the "Postulates of Political Economy," he will perceive what I mean. The argument in the first cases is labored and difficult, and I am not sure that it is throughout altogether clear; while in the second cases there is an ease and power and a transparent clearness which impress the most careless reader. Perhaps the two qualities are incompatible; but at any rate Bagehot was pre-eminently an inventor and describer, and that in bold and broad outlines, and not a laboring reasoner or exhaustive analyst. This was one reason, I think, in addition to the difficulties in his way as a financier and statistician, why he was not an economic authority of the sort sometimes supposed, though he was a much higher authority.

Let me add a word or two on his style; at least on his later style, less buoyant and elastic than his earlier, as Mr. Hutton tells us. With this style I was bound to be extremely familiar; and as Bagehot was fond of talking about style, I came to know various points of excellence at which he consciously aimed. His natural tendency was that way, but he also labored to be conversational, to put things in the most direct and picturesque manner, as people would talk to each other in common speech, to remember and use expressive colloquialisms. Such Americanisms as the "shrinkage" of values he had a real liking for, and constantly applied them. I have known an eminent German economist so caught by this style as to imagine that Bagehot was a self-taught business man and not a scholar, whereas he was peculiarly a scholar and a student; not only highly educated, but choosing literature for his mistress at the sacrifice of success in other pursuits which were open to him.

Digitized by Google

Besides this conversational tone, Bagehot aimed at an excessive simplicity, formed in part by his habit of writing for the "City." In his essay on Adam Smith he ascribes the success of the latter, compared with Hume who also wrote soundly enough on political economy, to the directness and convincingness of his style, which impressed the ordinary business man, whereas Hume and other literary writers seemed to be playing with their subject; and Bagehot seemed to have been guided by this belief in his own later writing generally, as he certainly was in the *Economist*. He had always some typical City man in his mind's eye; a man not skilled in literature or the turnings of phrases, with a limited vocabulary and knowledge of theory, but keen as to facts, and reading for the sake of information and guidance respecting what vitally concerned him. To please this ideal City man, Bagehot would use harsh and crude or redundant expressions, sometimes ungrammatical if tried by ordinary tests; anything to drive his meaning home. Thus in turning over the pages of "Lombard Street" at random I find such phrases as "money-market money," "borrowable money," "alleviative treatment," "one of these purposes is the meeting a demand for cash"; and sentences like this, "Continental bankers and others instantly send great sums here, as soon as the rate shows that it can be done profitably," where the "instantly" is grammatically superfluous though it helps to drive the meaning home. For such awkwardnesses Bagehot not only did not care, but he was even eager to use them sometimes if he thought they would arrest attention. He was always most careful, too, to see that the drift of any passage, the impression a hasty reader of the kind described would get from it, was exactly what he intended. He was never content merely with having the meaning there provided the words were delicately and nicely weighed; the meaning must shine through the words: and he detested all writing which gave a false impression, however verbally exact. If I may quote my own experience, he was always amused to come up from the City and give me in a sentence—The City says you think so and so—the meaning of a long article on which I had labored, perhaps using many figures. Hence I believe one of the excellences of his later style. It was rhetoric deliberately and skillfully used by a master after years of practice, and which so impresses his meaning as no other writing I know of on economic subjects, except Adam Smith's, impresses. This style was a weapon admirably fitted for the work he did and was peculiarly qualified to do, though the description of it also shows of itself that there are some topics of economic discussion for which it is unfit.

Digitized by Google

II.

We come, then, to the question of the work which Bagehot has actually done as an economist. As far as books are concerned, it consists mainly of two volumes: "Lombard Street: A Description of the Money Market," published in 1873, and the present "Economic Studies," part of which were published in this *Review* some time before his death, and the remainder was found among his papers, being all that he has left of a descriptive and historical account of the ideas of English political economy. In addition, he published many years ago, in a collected form, some articles on International Money, suggesting as a step towards that end an assimilation of English and American money on a plan which he describes; and he had in readiness for publication when he died a similar collection of his articles on the Depreciation of Silver, which was soon after published. But however valuable in themselves, the last two were obviously minor works, both in subject and treatment, compared with the "Economic Studies" and the "Lombard Street," on which Bagehot's reputation must now mainly rest. Of course these books do not represent his whole work. As a journalist, he has left innumerable articles which it would be hopeless to collect; and both in journalism and conversation he was the propagator of fruitful ideas which had not a little influence on the course of affairs and on the education of the public in matters of political economy. It will be more difficult to show the work he did in this way than it is to describe his literary effort; but to the present generation at least, this part of his life must be allowed its due importance. What I should say of all — of the journalism and the conversation, as well as the books — would be, that Bagehot's work, as I have already indicated, consisted in thinking original thoughts as to the whole scope and method of political economy, as well as some important topics in it, and expressing these thoughts in a striking and convincing manner; and also in describing broadly and clearly the leading outlines of the science, as well as the features of the modern organization of business, — the great commerce, — which he understood to be practically the subject-matter of the science. The two kinds of work were closely interconnected, his new ideas being the result of his general powers of vision and description; and his characteristic achievement, I should say, is, that he has described the science and its subject-matter in such a way as to put them in a wholly new light. I believe there is a special need of description of the subject in the present stage of economic discussion; but no literary student requires to be told generally how much good description goes for in any complex questions. To describe is to

Digitized by Google

solve complex problems; or at least to show the limits to the careful and exact logician, who may afterwards be trusted to apply his processes with success, though he has not himself the keenness of imagination to outline the precise subject from the confused mass of facts presented to him. It was for description in the highest sense of the word that Bagehot was peculiarly prepared when he came to the consideration of economic questions, and in description his characteristic work consists.

Going more into detail, I begin with the "Economic Studies" as being really, with all their incompleteness, the most important work which Bagehot left. This is the result, in part, of its connection with what is perhaps the most interesting of all his non-economic writing, — his "Physics and Politics," — which contain the germ of the idea worked out in these studies. On the first page of that book we read: —

"One peculiarity of this age is the sudden acquisition of much physical knowledge. There is scarcely a department of science or art which is the same, or at all the same, as it was fifty years ago. A new world of inventions — of railways and of telegraphs — has grown up around us which we cannot help seeing; a new world of ideas is in the air and affects us, though we do not see it. A full estimate of these effects would require a great book, and I am sure I could not write it; but I think I may usefully, in a few papers, show how upon one or two great points the new ideas are modifying two old sciences, — politics and political economy."

But the "Physics and Politics" do not themselves contain the fulfilment of this promise, as far as political economy is concerned. Though some of the illustrations are from the world of business, particularly the striking illustration in the chapter on the "Age of Discussion," as to the "animated moderation" which is the secret of success with the typical English man of business, yet the book itself only shows how political ideas have been evolved and how the political life of modern communities has grown to be possible, and omits altogether, or at least does not treat with the same directness, the economic ideas. The oversight I believe to have been due to the illness which interrupted the composition of the "Physics and Politics," an interruption which seems even to have altered the plan of the book as it was being written; still the omission remains. But the thread which was dropped in "Physics and Politics" is here taken up again in these "Economic Studies," which thus form a sequel to the former work. The "Postulates of Political Economy" and the "Preliminaries of Political Economy" are chapters clearly belonging to the main idea of the "Physics and Politics." The word "preliminaries" even corresponds to the "preliminary age" which forms the first chapter of the latter book. The description of an

Digitized by Google

economic as distinguished from a non-economic state of society, and of the transition from the latter to the former stage, is also clearly parallel to the description in the "Physics and Politics" of the age of discussion and the transition into it from the earlier ages.

This statement of the scope of the "Economic Studies" almost indicates of itself the leading idea which Bagehot has worked out. His main statement is, that the notions of English political economy, which is an abstract science, instead of being universally applicable to all men in all ages, as the founders of the science in some confused manner assumed, are in fact only applicable to real life with qualifications, and are only applicable approximately to societies organized for business on a basis of free contract and with capital and labor freely transferable, as that of England very nearly is now and is tending more and more to be. Of course it is not quite true that writers like Adam Smith and Ricardo really imagined the applicability of their doctrines to be so universal as they sometimes appeared to assume; they had a consciousness that their doctrines were limited in the concrete, and the practical direction of much of their writing was itself a proof that they realized in some way the limitations of their science: but certainly they did not define sharply what the concrete limitations were or were likely to be, or indicate their sense of the continual change going on in actual conditions. Many later writers of course have insisted on this abstract character of economics; and there is an angry quarrel, as is well known, between them and the "historical school" in political economy, because the latter insists that the science pretends to be concrete, or is nothing if it is not concrete, while they maintain that in that light it is manifestly not true. But what Bagehot has done is not merely, like other writers, to point out the abstract character of the science, but to prove as against the historical school that there is an age and society — the whole business world of England at the present time, and a large part of other modern communities — in which the assumptions of English political economy are approximately true in the concrete as well as in the abstract. We are in an economic age, and the leading assumptions of political economy are applicable with comparatively little friction, so that the abstract doctrines can be applied to a concrete world.

It is unnecessary to go over in detail the assumptions and leading ideas of English political economy which Bagehot takes up one by one, and shows to be approximately true of the English business world at the present time. The field he travels over is very large;

Digitized by Google

and his remarks are so suggestive, both as to differences in the economic condition of different countries, which modify the application to them of the English doctrines, and as to the gradual extension of the area over which the English doctrines are true in the concrete, that it would be impossible within any brief limits to give a full notion of the value of the work. The way, for instance, in which he explains the modification of the Malthusian doctrine of population necessary in new countries, the modification which it requires from the existence of these new countries even in old countries themselves, and the possibility of the doctrine itself being modified in old countries for physiological reasons, while an exact account of the really true doctrine at a given moment is being made possible by means of statistics, would take many pages to describe and discuss. The discussion again on the transferability of labor and transferability of capital, as being practically arrived at in English business, would also take pages to describe, as well as raise interesting points for discussion. It would be most instructive to compare, for instance, Bagehot's assumption of complete transferability in both cases as the characteristic of English business, with the limitations in the concrete which Professor Cairnes urges as regards labor in one of his most able essays.* Bagehot seems to me right in assuming the transferability in England as practically complete, compared at least with the state of matters in a non-economic age; but there are few writers so exact as Professor Cairnes, of whom Bagehot had the highest opinion, and their difference of view here, or rather apparent difference, would be most interesting to follow out. It is enough, however, for the present to mark how much the leading idea of this book shifts the landmarks of economic study over a wide field and alters the whole view of the science.

In two other ways these "Economic Studies," imperfect as they are, seem to me most valuable. The personal sketches of Adam Smith, Malthus, and Ricardo, with the fragment on Mill, help in the directest way to the comprehension of their characteristic work in economic science, as Bagehot understood it. I doubt if his estimate of Adam Smith, whom it is not so easy to see round, is adequate: but the sketches of Malthus and Ricardo; the description of the accidental way in which the former, "a mild pottering person," came to accomplish his great revolution in economic thought; and the way in which Ricardo, a Jew by race, and accustomed to work in a market where the articles dealt in are immaterial, and where

*Cairnes's "Some Leading Principles of Political Economy," page 70 *et seq.*

Digitized by Google

the assumptions of political economy are true, was able to found the abstract science as it is now understood, — seem to be almost perfect. Ricardo was certainly, in Bagehot's opinion, as I knew from conversation as well as from this sketch, by far the best writer on the subject, in spite of defects in expression and other difficulties which Bagehot describes in this sketch; and one of the best services he has rendered to the study is perhaps to restore Ricardo to his proper position as an authority. The other way in which the book excels is in the richness and vigor of the remarks on business; which is no doubt a feature of all Bagehot's writing, but here comes out most strongly, as he is dealing with the entire differences between an economic and a non-economic age. He says of the "Wealth of Nations," that there are scarcely five consecutive pages in it "which do not contain some sound and solid observation, important in practice and replete with common-sense. The most experienced man of business would have been proud of such a fund of just maxims fresh from life." And much the same, it seems to me, may be said of these "Economic Studies"; the maxims, I may observe, being very often such as Bagehot would frequently use in his talk. There is a good specimen in the chapter on the Growth of Capital, where he traces to a sound rule of business one of the motives for the accumulation of capital in a business age: —

"The pecuniary classes have a general feeling of 'liability' about their minds to which other classes are strangers; and justly, because their risks — not only their known but their unknown ones — are greater. I once heard a very experienced man lay down this principle: — 'A man of business,' he said, 'ought not to be over-cautious; he ought to take what seem good things in his trade pretty much as they come; he won't get any good by trying to see through a millstone. But he ought to put all his caution into his "reserve fund"; he may depend on it he will be "done" somehow before long, and probably when he least thinks it; he ought to heap up a great fund in a shape in which he can use it, against the day at which he wants it.' It is the disposition so generated which is in a trading nation among the strongest motives to save."

But Bagehot's felicity of business illustration is too well known and recognized to need any further reference to this point. In all he says about business he is like a witness to the facts of which political economy has to treat; and hence, I believe, the peculiar value of his description of the economic age which we find in these "Economic Studies." It must be a never-failing subject of regret that the book is incomplete; that the testimony is cut short just when we begin to understand it, and see what it would have been.

Coming to the "Lombard Street," the remark I would make is, that this book is also, and even more strikingly than the "Economic

Digitized by Google

Studies," a book of description. Bagehot's own alternative title for it was "A Description of the Money Market." Its scope is not so wide, as the money market is only a department of the great field of the science, though an important department; but it is wide enough to make the book a considerable one, especially as Bagehot treats the subject. The money market is not only described in a series of remarkable pictures of its chief objects, — the Bank of England, the joint-stock banks, the private banks, and the discount houses, — but the description necessarily involves a frequent reference to the whole organization of the "great commerce." The sources of the loanable fund with which the monetary institutions of Lombard Street have to deal, the democratic structure of English commerce which has arisen through the facility which men with small capital have of borrowing, the transferability of capital in England, the reasons for quick fluctuations in the value of money by which the action of the different institutions is affected, and many other peculiarities of the whole business organization, all come in for their share of explanation, and are fully explained in and for themselves after Bagehot's usual manner, and not merely by way of allusion as they bear on the subject in hand. In some degree, therefore, "Lombard Street" even anticipates the "Economic Studies." And its value in this respect was quickly appreciated. Professor Cairnes quotes from it, in his "Leading Principles," in 1874, a description of the transferability of capital which contains *in petto* the idea worked out in the second essay of the "Economic Studies," on the "Postulates of Political Economy."* The "Economic Studies" make a greater work; but "Lombard Street" explains in some degree how it grew, and why Bagehot's testimony is so valuable as to the organization of the great commerce. He was a witness and observer of the central part of the organization; and it was his merit to have started the idea of giving a description, as well as to have carried it into execution. The conception of the London money market as an organization does not seem to have occurred to any one before.

It would hardly come within my province to describe the book minutely or offer criticism upon it, especially as "Lombard Street" so speedily found a high place in popular estimation. Unluckily for myself, too, I had not the opportunity of taking it in "in a lump," as I gradually became acquainted with its descriptions and its principles in the first years of my acquaintance with Bagehot, before the book itself was written; and I revised the rough notes of the book itself, and afterwards the completed sheets, almost the whole

*Compare Professor Cairnes's "Leading Principles," page 68, with "Economic Studies," page 41 *et seq.*

Digitized by Google

book being practically written twice over. But perhaps I may say that it appears to me the most finished in form of anything that Bagehot has done. He was full of the subject, which had occupied much of his life for many years before he wrote; and his aim, in which he perfectly succeeded, was to impress both men of business — to whom, as I have said, he consciously adapted his later style — and the outside world of literary and public men who had no special acquaintance with City subjects. The only other work to compare it with is the "English Constitution," which is a description of the organization of English political life, in the same realistic method as Bagehot has pursued in describing the organization or constitution of the City; but "Lombard Street" seems even more careful, thorough, and realistic. It shows the high-water mark of what Bagehot could do in point of form and execution, and adds to the regret that time was not left him to finish the "Economic Studies" in the same fashion.

Apart from its special excellence as a descriptive book, "Lombard Street" likewise contains, I believe, Bagehot's most valuable contributions to economic science, irrespective of what he has done in the "Economic Studies" and elsewhere to exhibit the relation of the science to others and its modification by the new ideas of the age. He was really, if not the discoverer, at any rate the first writer who insisted upon and worked out as a cardinal principle of the money market the maintenance of the bank reserve. One has only to look back into the old books of political economy to see how completely the topic was not only overlooked, but not even dreamt of. But Bagehot makes it one of the themes and practical objects of the "Lombard Street"; explaining fully why bankers should keep a cash reserve, why the Bank of England has a special duty in the matter by the usage of the market, the principles which should regulate the amount of the reserve, the way in which the management of it affects the rate of discount or interest, the proper use of it in a panic, and in fact the whole lore of the subject almost from beginning to end. It seems to me that this doctrine alone is a very large contribution to economics, and would have done much to make the reputation of an economist who was that and nothing more. So much turns on the management of bank reserves as an influence on the economic condition of modern industrial communities, and that influence is becoming daily so much greater, that what Bagehot has done in this way cannot but grow in importance as time goes by.

Another important contribution he has made in "Lombard Street" is in popularizing the notion of a tendency in business to ebb and

Digitized by Google

flow; to be all excited and prosperous with a high level of prices at one time, and languid and unprosperous with a low level of prices at another. This rhythmical or cyclical movement in trade, though not yet fully accepted by literary economists, is a familiar enough idea to the ordinary speculator in the City, and is embedded in a well-known book, — which is not, however, read so much as it ought to be, — Tooke's "History of Prices," while there is much other business writing in which the same idea is found; but Bagehot takes it up and makes it his own, besides giving a psychological explanation of it which should go far to make it acceptable even to the merely literary economist, who is clamorous for proof. Bagehot's own testimony as a witness should count for a great deal, his chapter on "Why Lombard Street is sometimes highly excited and sometimes very dull" being in fact valuable as a piece of evidence as much as any other part of the description in the book. What Bagehot has done on this head seems also the more valuable, because along with the general tone of the book it popularizes and generalizes the idea of aggregate effects arising from the working of economic tendencies, which tendencies can be traced and their effects within certain limits predicted. When we come to concrete economy, we have not only to deal with modifications of the abstract science, but a new class of phenomena is brought before us which may be the subject of scientific treatment; and of this class "Lombard Street" gives a sketch, besides preparing the way for studying them by the outline of the business organization to which the phenomena relate.

It is more difficult, as I have said, to give an idea of what Bagehot did as a journalist and as a propagator of economic ideas in conversation, and by means of the great prestige and influence he had acquired in the political world. Discussions arise and pass away, and what each man did in them it is not easy to trace. This is plain as regards what passes in conversation and private notes; but even in journalism it would not be easy by a collection of articles, assuming that the articles themselves on passing topics would be interesting enough to collect, to give a notion of what a particular journalist did. Sometimes it happens that a man with a special knowledge of a particular subject cannot write upon it when the occasion arises, because he is busy with something else; so that his ideas have to be filtered through another mind if they are made public at all. Sometimes much of his own writing has to be on subjects not specially interesting to him, and where he is perhaps the funnel for another man's ideas. Thus the articles of a journalist, apart from their fugitive character, which is an obvious

Digitized by Google

drawback, may be a very imperfect representation of his contribution in the shape of ideas to a particular journal. Bagehot was happily situated for avoiding the latter difficulty, of sometimes writing another man's ideas on another man's subject instead of his own, though he could not altogether escape the necessity of writing on what did not much interest him; but he could not escape at all the necessity of passing on favorite subjects and ideas to others. All I can do, then, is to point out one or two leading matters where his ideas did influence the course of affairs and contribute to the education of the public mind. His doctrine about the bank reserve was one of them, communicated to the world and inculcated upon it in innumerable articles, of his own and others, but all stimulated by his ideas, long before "Lombard Street" was written. The same may be said of the doctrine about the cycles in business, a principal part of his chapter in "Lombard Street" where that idea is explained consisting of the textual quotation of a long article which he wrote about the beginning of 1872, when his "Lombard Street" itself was being written. The same idea was put forward in many other articles, some of which were not his own writing, though he gave the idea and the lead. The essays on International Money and on the Depreciation of Silver are also specimens of what he contributed in this way; the latter, as we all remember, having a distinct effect at the time on the discussions of the silver question. His leading idea, that imports into India would be checked and exports stimulated, so that silver would again be more in demand, had a conspicuous influence in arresting hasty action. Of ideas or policies embodied in articles, and which have not since been collected into books, — either in their original form, as in the two latter books, or in a transfigured and improved form, as in "Lombard Street," — I should be disposed to mention first what Bagehot wrote again and again, or caused to be written, about lending money to imperfectly civilized foreign states. It was his conspicuous honor to have "spotted" the danger of these loans long before the public were sensible of it, in fact almost from the time the loans began; and in spite of the portentous growth of the system, which nothing seemed to check, I believe he really mitigated the evil, arraying the sober opinion in the City against it. Another conspicuous service, I think, was in resisting the *bad* financial proposals of Mr. Gladstone's powerful Government, — the proposed imposition of the match tax, the proposed repeal or modification of the railway passenger duty, and above all the proposed abolition of the income tax, which latter he most vehemently opposed. Generally, he was a useful influence in criticizing the financial proposals

Digitized by Google

of all Governments, so liable for party reasons to deviate from the straight line; but his resistance to the sacrifice of the income tax was especially memorable. Last of all I would mention his conspicuous resistance to the purchase of the Suez Canal shares. Undoubtedly, when the public were almost universally jubilant, he did much to "take the gilt" off that transaction, and encourage the Liberal party to criticize it; so that he was a great influence in forming opinion at the time, whatever the ultimate verdict of history may be. I do not think anything he did in this way will compare in quality with the work in the "Lombard Street" or the "Economic Studies." His work in this respect, to use Mr. Hutton's phrase, was that of the least part of him; he was often not deeply interested himself, taking it only as "all in the day's work," to use his own phrase: but what he did was none the less considerable, enough and more than enough to account for his authority and reputation, and to have made a name for him as an economist alone. Even here, however, he succeeded by qualities not specially economic, by quickness to see and say the right thing because his point of view commanded so large a field.

It is time for me to bring this paper to a close, and I have only one or two things to add by way of conclusion. If my account be correct, a very exceptional place must be claimed for Bagehot as an economic writer. He has not only gained rank amongst the economists in the ordinary plane of their work, but in connecting the science with the physical philosophy of the time, and showing how the new ideas modify it, in resolving conflicting views by a higher generalization and thus clearing away prejudices which impeded the study, in describing the features of the economic age of the world and the special features of the English business organization, besides attracting people to the study by interesting writing; but he has performed one of those leading services which entitle him to foremost rank as an economic writer —to a place, I should think, in the succession of leading authors along with those he has himself sketched. Looking at the science as it was before him, and as it appears through his spectacles, it certainly seems to me difficult to assign him too high a place.

In one respect, also, his services, I believe, will prove more and more valuable as time goes on, though I doubt if he was fully conscious of what he was doing. This is in the preparation he has made for the statistical development of the science. In describing the features of the economic age accurately, and especially in describing the working of economic phenomena in the mass in

Digitized by Google

business societies constituted like that of England at the present time, he has really been doing preparatory work for the solution of problems which can only be solved statistically. All that relates to the bank reserve, to the increase of bank-note circulation at certain seasons or in certain years, to the succession of good and bad years in business, to the tendency of money to be dearer at one season than at another and in one year than in another, to the special danger of panics at certain times, involve statistical considerations; and without being strictly a statistician, still by his quantitative sense Bagehot has given an idea of how the statistics would tell, and has prepared the way for the more exact study. In so doing he has also helped to determine more definitely the scientific character of economic studies themselves, about which there is much vain dispute. Whatever wrangling there may be as to giving the name of science to other branches of the study, there can at least be none here. In describing the *normal* phenomena of business societies, people are describing things which follow each other in regular sequence and which have a vital connection with each other, and where prediction is therefore possible; while the description is also of scientific value by giving the means of quickly ascertaining the presence of disturbing, that is of abnormal, influences. As it happens, no scientific man could be more successful in prophecy than was Bagehot himself. His predictions of the future course of the money market when the great drain of specie to India through the cotton famine took place, and more lately when the German drain of gold began, turned out to be exactly true, and for the reasons which he assigned. The study of money-market phenomena and of the whole phenomena of the economic age, on the lines thus laid down, must lead to a more accurate general intelligence of the normal course of things, and a more accurate general anticipation of the effects of any disturbing cause. Bagehot's anticipations of the more accurate investigation of the true doctrine of population also point to a new source of scientific knowledge which is opening out. The gift of prophecy in some economic matters which Bagehot possessed may perhaps be the general inheritance of another generation.

I have already hinted at the infinite regret which must be felt at the non-completion of the programme sketched out in these "Economic Studies." Perhaps I ought to add my testimony to what Mr. Hutton has said of the premature interruption of Bagehot's labors by death. No event could more powerfully suggest the notion of a life beyond life, so as to explain the mystery of so fair a work being left incomplete. Mentally Bagehot was at his best

Digitized by Google

when he died, and he looked forward to many years of happy toil, both in finishing these "Economic Studies" and other work beyond. So far from becoming absorbed in economic science as he grew older, though his later writing happened to be almost all economic, Bagehot to the last gave me the impression of only passing through one mental stage, which being passed through he would again leave political economy behind. To his historical and descriptive account of English political economy he was likely enough to have added a history of political ideas, or at any rate some other work of general philosophy, which had necessarily more attraction for him than the ordinary topics of political economy. His actual achievement in political philosophy and literature was very great; but the writing had almost all been the work of about fifteen years of his life, and at the age when he died he might well have looked forward to other fifteen years which would have yielded at least an equal work both in quantity and quality. He spoke to me only a few weeks before he died of the difference he felt in his power of work; of his being able to produce more in a given time because he knew better what he was doing, though he had no longer the elasticity of youth and the youthful power of continuous and exhausting labor. I am not writing all this, however, to indulge in vain regret, but as some excuse for claiming a higher place for Bagehot than what those who did not know him may readily grant. The world must perforce judge him by an incomplete record, extended as that record is; but it is at least permissible to friends to show that the fragments left are those of a grand building, that the design went much farther than what we see, and that, fine and noble as the work is, it is greatly interesting as proving how much finer and nobler the whole structure would have been.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

EXTRACTS FROM ARTICLE ON "OXFORD."

(*Prospective Review, Vol. viii., No. xxxi.**)

FATHER NEWMAN is a man to fail. With all his ability and invention and logical accuracy, there is generally in all his writings some impossible postulate, some incredible axiom, that mars the whole. So it is here: he deduces his entire theory of a university from what we had always understood to be the obsolete derivation, that it is to teach "universal knowledge." This is odd enough: we are actually to receive from the emissaries of the pope the very theory which twenty years ago was in vogue among certain rather advanced sectaries of the Radical philosophy. A man of some wealth and transactive ability sometimes has a family; he is struck with the importance of various subjects. He says, "There is Chemistry: what progress it makes day by day! What a scheme for making soap Dr. Dirtihands was mentioning yesterday! — my son must know Chemistry. And there is French: '*Commong survatteel?*' — my son shall know French. And there is Physiology; what an interesting topic the human frame is! We are always having diseases we can't account for. I wonder where I caught that cold last week — my son shall know Physiology. And then, too, what was that when I felt so floored the other morning? I remember it was those barrister fellows that were for me against the Brewer's Company, and they were talking of the late Lord Chancellor and his always giving things to his relations — what's called 'nepotism'; and then a little red-headed man, who was very quick in business, said, 'Certainly, certainly, — why, he's *Nepos himself;*' and then everybody laughed at him, and I laughed. I wonder why we laughed? It is very unpleasant laughing when one don't know the reason. I fancy it is something in Latin — my son shall know Latin." And so on through all the range of the sciences; and the end is, that the young gentleman is sent to a "seminary" near London, where everything is taught, according to the *Times*, "without corporal penalties," whereat he learns at least nothing. Something of this sort, we learn, is the Catholic idea of a college: universal information is to be diffused; all sciences, "as the term university expresses," are to be taught; everybody is to be set to learn everything. But was

* This paper was written after the appointment of the first Commission to inquire into the Reform of Oxford University in 1852, and soon after the publication of Dr. Newman's Lectures on "The Idea of a University" in Dublin.

Digitized by Google

it necessary to have so great an apparatus for so small a work? Is this what the Catholic Church is to do for us? to build new lecture rooms, to overteach a few pupils, to try (and fail) to induce mankind at large to search and seek for universal knowledge? Why did she come so far? We could do *that* for ourselves.

. . . . . .

In our notion, the object of a university education is, to train intellectual men for the pursuits of an intellectual life. For though education by training or reading will not make people quicker or cleverer or more inventive, yet it will make them soberer. A man who finds out for himself all that he knows is rarely remarkable for calmness. The excitement of the discovery and a weak fondness for his own investigations — a parental inclination to believe in their excessive superiority — combine to make the self-taught and original man dogmatic, decisive, and detestable. He comes to you with a notion that Noah discarded in the ark, and attracts attention to it as if it were a stupendous novelty of his own. A book-bred man rarely does this; he knows that his notions are old notions, that his favorite theories are the rejected axioms of long-deceased people: he is too well aware how much may be said for every side of everything to be very often overweeningly positive on any point.

It is of immense importance that there should be, among the more opulent and comfortable classes, a large number of minds trained by early discipline to this habitual restraint and sobriety. The very ignorance of such people is better than the best knowledge of half mankind. An uneducated man has no notion of being without an opinion; he is distinctly aware whether Venus is inhabited, and knows as well as Mr. Cobden what is to be found in *all* the works of Thucydides: but his opinionated ignorance is rather kept in check when people as strong-headed as himself, as rich, as respectable, and much better taught, are continually avowing that they don't at all know any of the points on which he is ready to decide. And when those who are careful *have* opinions, they are in general able to bear the temperate discussion of them. Education cannot insure infallibility, but it most certainly insures deliberation and patience; it forms the opinions of people that can form the opinions of others.

This, too, is a function that increases in difficulty with the increase in civilization. As society goes on, life becomes more complicated and its problems more difficult. New perplexities, new temptations, new difficulties, arise with new circumstances; every walk in life is clogged with tedious difficulties, and thronged with countless competitors, and overrun with infinite dangers. The moral problems, the political problems, the social problems, the religious problems, require a greater stress of understanding; we were in

Digitized by Google

simple addition, we *are* in the differential calculus. Take the case of politics in this country now, and as it was a century and a half ago. In Queen Anne's time the question was, whether the Pretender should be king [and] whether Popery should be the religion of the state, and that was nearly all: on so large an issue, very inferior and illiterate minds were quite competent to form a sound judgment. Sir Roger de Coverley, for example, who believed in witchcraft, and was not a college man, was quite able to reject the pope and receive the Queen — "God bless her." But how the poor old gentleman would have been confounded in the present day! What would he have thought of Free Trade, Protectionism, and Caucasian Christianity? He would, we fear, have reflected in this wise on the General Election: — "You see, though I can't quite tell (for I am getting old) what Lord Derby has done with all his old principles, I shall vote for young John Rising, who intends to support him, — for you know his father, Sir John, was my very old friend, and knew more of fox-hunting than any one in Worcestershire, notwithstanding some were so foolish as to think me his equal; and though the Chancellor of the Exchequer is said in London to be a Jew, I could not deny but the poor in my county *was* more comfortable than ever." This was good influential reasoning in the first year of the eighteenth century, but it won't do now, — we want men to get up facts, weigh principles, suggest illustrations, appreciate arguments; and this is the use of learning.

So too in religion: how differently are we placed nowadays, in this Babel of sects and the deluge of criticism, from the old times when the choice was between two or three distinct creeds, depending on common and conceded postulates, and differing only in the respective correctness of a few not too complicated deductions! Now that the postulates are gone, who is there that can estimate the insuperable task of (as it is phrased) making a religion? And in the minor subjects of taste and refinement, with the growth of literature, the increase of luxury, and the advent of æsthetics, who can too highly estimate the difficulty of reviewing works of art, and criticizing styles, and comprehending the German speculations? And in the practical concerns of life, though a prolonged education rather interferes than otherwise with a perfect and instinctive mastery of a narrow department, though it disqualifies men for special or mechanical labor and the petty habits of a confined routine, — yet for affairs on a considerable scale, for a general estimate on general probabilities, and for changing the hand and the mind from one species of pursuit to another, a carefully formed mind and a large foundation of diversified knowledge are indisputably wonderful and all but indispensable aids. Men who blindly and instinctively follow

Digitized by Google

out and feel after the minute details of a single occupation, generally know but that one, and can learn no other. In the increasing and multiplying wealth of the world, in the various and ever-varying ramifications of human industry, it becomes necessary that some people should comprehend the general plan, while others elaborate the special minutiæ; and it is lucky that the very wealth which, by its superabundance and the complexity of its nature, renders more than anything else all this enlargement of knowledge necessary, also by getting together in single hands secures the easy conditions, the pecuniary resources, and the youthful leisure that are the necessary prerequisites for its extensive diffusion.

. . . . . .

A certain speechlessness is still a part of the [Oxford] character. "You will," says Hazlitt, "hear more good things in one day on the top of the coach, going or coming from Oxford, than in one year from all the residents in that learned seminary." A slightly excitable lady was once asked within our hearing what *she* thought of the *literati* of Oxford: she said, "They were so stupid I could strike them." But this is not quite conclusive. It is not good that every one should be loquacious or excitable or original: some must listen if it is meant that they should understand. Particularly the custom is to refrain from speaking on their own pursuits. There is some story of a head of a house who was presented to Napoleon after the peace of Amiens, and was asked on his return what was his opinion of the French Emperor. "Sir," replied the dignitary, "you see at once that he is not a university man, — he talks about the *classics*." Such was his opinion.

In moral and political opinions the Oxford man is quite as defined. Mr. Gladstone, to take the most marked and decisive example, is obviously and utterly different from what he would have been if educated anywhere else. He is the only considerable political Englishman who has undergone what can, even by courtesy, be called a philosophical training. There is about him, and in all his writings and in all his speeches, a certain desire for principle, a wish to have an *ultimatum*, a reason, an axiom from which and to which the intellectual effort may start and be referred. His first principles are rarely ours; we may often think them obscure, sometimes incomplete, occasionally quite false: but we cannot deny that they are the result of distinct thought with disciplined faculties upon adequate data, of a careful and dispassionate consideration of all the objections which occurred, whether easy or insuperable, trifling or severe. How Dr. Arnold estimates this training — still conveyed from the same text-book as in Chaucer's time — may be

Digitized by Google

read in a hundred passages of his letters and works. "We have been reading," says he, speaking of Aristotle, "some of the Rhetoric in the sixth form this half-year; and its immense value struck me again so forcibly that I could not consent to send my son to a university where he would lose it altogether, and where his whole studies would be formal merely and not real, — either mathematics or philology, with nothing answering to the Aristotle and Thucydides of Oxford." And again: — "If one might wish for impossibilities, I might then wish that my children might be well versed in physical science, but in due subordination to the fullness and freshness of their knowledge on all subjects. This, however, I believe cannot be; and physical science, if studied at all, seems too great to be studied ἐν παρέργῳ: wherefore, rather than have it the principal thing in my son's mind, I would gladly have him think that the sun went round the earth and that the stars were so many spangles set in the firmament." And he acted on his theory. "You may believe," he remarks with respect to the London University, "that I have not forgotten the dear old Stagyrite in our examinations, and I hope that he will be construed and discussed in Somerset House as well as in the schools."

In other Oxford men this is as remarkable. You cannot open the writings of the most dissimilar among them without being struck by the thoughtful element which they have in common. There is a perpetual and often quite unconscious employment of expressions and illustrations derived from the Greek, but especially from the Aristotelian philosophy, a certain accuracy in the expression of principles, and a certain keen deductiveness of understanding, which distinguish the works of men whom nature markedly and of set purpose discriminated from each other; and this lasts their lifetime. Coleridge used to say that if you took up a philosophical German writer, no matter whether second-rate or first-rate or fourth-rate, you would be struck with a certain carefulness of tone, a curious and guarded discrimination in the use of exact terms, a foreseeing of objections, and so on, which would induce you to remark, "Really, this writer is a philosopher;" whereas in fact it was only that the general style of philosophical thought was so diffused in Germany, that any man of fair ability, fair industry, and fair power of imitation could easily acquire and affect it. Something of the same sort seems to exist in the very atmosphere of Oxford; for if you turn even from such great writers as Dr. Whewell, Sir John Herschel, or Mr. Mill, to the writings of even an inferior man trained on the characteristically Oxford system, you will feel at once that although you may and will lose in vigor

Digitized by Google

of originality, in variety of knowledge, in brilliancy of illustration, in liveliness of mind, yet you will gain in mere speculativeness. What theories there are, will be expressed, as theories should be, with calmness, with accuracy, with dullness, with carefulness, with an anticipation of objections, after a conversancy with the ideas of what philosophers have preceded them.

. . . . . .

The fact is, that Oxford men want *εὐστοχία*, — they want intuitiveness. From a defect of liveliness, from an over-caution of understanding, they have not the *ταχύ τι*, the happy facility which takes hold at once and forever of the right point or the right questions at the right moment. There is often not spring enough in the nature of such a man: he can go well in the highroad of learning, but he won't do for the cross-country exercise of human life, — it puts him out. He does not like that there should be virtues not in Aristotle's list, and it is impossible to convince him that there is anything which is not dreamed of in his philosophy. Give him time and he will generally come right; but in this hasty world who can *have* time? As the best speaker in a concourse of men is the man who has the best sayings there ready, so in action we must be able to act wisely at once, or else we must either do nothing or act unwisely.

In this respect the Cambridge men do better. A hard and mathematical Johnian is perhaps perfectly prepared for every abstract difficulty of active life. He may want taste and discrimination, and judgment in character, and skill in dealing with men, or art in persuading them; but in the bare application of mere principles, in the thorough mastery of appalling facts, in the technical manipulations — to speak absurdly — of any intellectual pursuit, according at least to our observation, he will never fail. Such men generally see a thing in the right light at first; and if they once get right, all the oratory which ever was or can be, all the eloquence of a private tutor, all the pathos of senior fellow[s], will never induce them to swerve from their pragmatical honesty or to abate one jot of clear intellectual certainty in their dogmatic conviction. But they fail even in intellectual pursuits when the finer faculties are required: they are good actuaries but bad metaphysicians; when they write books on thoughtful subjects, they make blunders without end. Mr. Mill, we believe, somewhere says of the last generation of eminent Cambridge men, that he never heard an *argument* from them which was worth anything; and though this be a trifle contemptuous, yet it is certain that of late the amount of general thought on general subjects for which we are indebted to Cambridge is immensely less than what we owe to Oxford.

Digitized by Google

Is not this really good? We asked so long ago that no reader can be asked to remember it, whether there was not something very singular in the old English idea that the educational systems of both the two old universities were both perfect. Like most odd and old ideas, it has much truth. Is it not perhaps better that we should have one university which practically devotes itself mainly to the culture of thought, and another which devotes itself principally to the training men for the more difficult species of intellectual action? These are the two duties of a university, as we showed just now; it is perhaps good that they should be kept in a certain measure separate. Each fulfills its own task rather better if it aim at one mainly, than if it aspire to both equally. Besides, it is to be observed that each selects out of the general society exactly those who are thought to be best fitted to excel in the requirements and studies which constitute its test and its training. A mathematician — the son perhaps of a blacksmith — goes to St. John's; the son of a country vicar, with a taste for moral subjects and the classics, is most properly dispatched to Oxford. Each is well trained, — the first for the conveyancer's chambers, the second for a rural rectory.

In two points the two universities coincide, — selecting two elements which we believe to be quite necessary for the real education of an intellectual Englishman: they both teach a compact system of learning. If we were teaching a Frenchman who is versatile, or an old Athenian who was versatility itself, this might not be of so great importance; perhaps it would not even be possible, for we question whether those unstable and changeable organizations could be kept resolutely to a narrow pursuit. With the Englishman it is different. His intelligence is slow and stubborn and sure; his memory, though retentive, is not facile: it is certain therefore that if you bother him with many things, he will learn none; if you do not allow him to become, as he thinks, *possessed* of some one acquisition, you will discontent him and he will leave you. "It would be well," so says a thoughtful writer,* "to impress on the young men of the present day the value of ignorance, as well as of knowledge; to give them fortitude and courage enough to acknowledge that there are books which they have not read and sciences which they do not wish to learn; and to make them feel that one of the very greatest defects in a mind is want of unity of purpose, and that everything which betrays this betrays also want of resolution and energy." For if this be not learnt easily and early, it will be learned painfully and late. One by one, day by

*Sewell on Plato, page 125.

Digitized by Google

day, the world will strip off the pretensions and false assumptions which we may put forth, no matter how great they be. What do you do for me? she asks; and she will require a solid answer. It has been a great happiness to many that two seats of national learning have consciously or unconsciously taken each a defined course and adopted a rigid system: the one by severe training in philosophers and historians, to teach men what *has* been thought; the other by a discipline in the technicalities of study, to prepare men for the like technicalities of abstruser action.

The other point of substantial unanimity between Oxford and Cambridge is the collegiate system. It is well observed by a gentleman who has given evidence, that this also is suitable to the national character. There is nothing for young men like being thrown into close neighborhood with young men: it is the age of friendship, and every encouragement should be given, every opportunity enlarged for it. Take an uncollegiate Englishman, and you will generally find that he has no *friends:* he has not the habit. He has his family, his business, his acquaintances, and these occupy his time. He has not been thrown during the breathing time of human life into close connection with those who are also beginning or thinking of beginning to enter on its labors. School friendships are childish; "after-life" rarely brings many: it is in youth alone that we can engrave deep and wise friendships on our close and stubborn texture. If there be romance in them, it is a romance which few would tear aside.

Of course also the college system, quite beside the labors of Tutors and Fellows, mainly aids in the work of education. All that "pastors and masters" can teach young people is as nothing when compared with what young people can't help teaching one another. Man made the school, God the play-ground. He did not leave children dependent on the dreams of parents or the pedantry of tutors. Before letters were invented, or books were, or governesses discovered, the neighbors' children, the outdoor life, the fists and the wrestling sinews, the old games (the oldest things in the world), the bare hill and the clear river, — these were education; and now, though Xenophon and sums be come, these are and remain. Horses and marbles, the knot of boys beside the schoolboy fire, the hard blows given and the harder ones received, — these educate mankind. So too in youth: the real plastic energy is not in tutors or lectures or in books "got up," but in Wordsworth and Shelley; in the books that all read because all like, in what all talk of because all are interested, in the argumentative walk or disputatious lounge; in the impact of young thought upon young

Digitized by Google

thought, of fresh thought on fresh thought, of hot thought on hot thought; in mirth and refutation, in ridicule and laughter: for these are the free play of the natural mind, and these cannot be got without a college.

. . . . . .

It must be recollected that the theological division of the English people corresponds, though very roughly, with a social division. Nonconformists differ much from Conformists: their habits are different, their manners are different, their ethics are different. A Unitarian marries a wife, and turns banker; his son is made a lord, and turns to the Church: *sic itur ad astra.* So subtle and so strong are the influences of life and society, of rank and homage and luxury, so feeble the strength of loose opinion, that few families resist the former long; hereditary wealth, in a generation or two, very conscientiously retreats to the religion of the wealthy. All this was quite forgotten at the establishment of the London University. Lord Brougham is accustomed to describe the expectations of thronged halls and eager students and intense and ceaseless study; and the astonishment of the promoters at the moderate number and calm demeanor and brief sojourn of those who responded to their call. Nor is the case altered now: the expanse of Gower Street will not emulate the slopes of St. Geneviêve, nor will De Morgan be followed like Abelard. The number of Nonconformists who desire to give their sons what can, in the English use of the term, be called a "university education," is not very considerable; nor, according to the better authorities, does it increase. They do not design their sons in general for an intellectual life, for the learned professions, for business on a large scale or of a varied kind; they do not wish their sons to form aristocratic connections: but to be solicitors, attorneys, merchants, in a patient and useful way. For this, they think — and most likely they think rightly — that twenty years of life are quite an adequate preparation; they believe that more would, in most cases, interfere with the practiced sagacity, the moderate habits, the simple wants, the routine inclinations, which are essential to the humbler sorts of practical occupation. Open, therefore, the older universities though you may, you will not practically increase or materially change the class who will resort to them; the Dissenters in Oxford will ever be but a small, a feeble, an immaterial, though certainly a respectable and perhaps an erudite minority. The English Catholics might be a more numerous — as we suspect they are in Oxford opinion a far more formidable — faction; a Catholic Hall, we can believe, would really be a nuisance in Oxford: yet even this, we imagine, should be

Digitized by Google

boldly encountered, — it would become much less fearful in a very few years. The English leanings and prejudices are so contrary to Romanism that it is only the semblance of persecution and the fortuitous opportunities of recent years which have occasioned its recent prominence. Would not the Tractarian movement have come to a point sooner, have gained less strength, have effected less for the Roman Church, if the Oxford men had from early youth seen exactly what Catholicism was? Familiarity will spoil romance: the charm of Romanism is its mystery. But anyhow, if what has been said be in the least true, — if Oxford is, as we have hinted, to educate our thinkers, — how absurd to train them in ignorance of what is! how peculiarly foolish to deny them the instruction of associating with people formed in other disciplines and bred in other faiths, — the only sure mode of comprehending those disciplines and estimating those faiths! how wretched to make them say exactly beforehand what they will believe, and that with an accuracy which hardly any cultivated man would like to apply even to his most elaborate or mature speculations! What wonder if this ends in the common doctrine that the Articles are "forms of thought," irremediable categories of the understanding, — certain by nature, as clear as if they were themselves revealed?

. . . . . .

Lastly, Oxford has vexed the English people: she has crossed their one speculative Affection, she has encountered their one speculative Hatred. So often as a Tractarian clergyman enters a village, and immediately there is a question of candlesticks and crosses and rood-lofts and piscinæ, — immediately people mutter, "Why, that is Oxford!" More than that: a hundred educated men (as Romanists boast), with her honors to their names and her token on their faces and her teaching on their minds, have deserted to the enemy of England. This can *not* be answered. These people are ever busy; their names are daily in the papers; they visit out-of-the-way places; they are gazed at in the quietest towns: and wherever one of the grave figures passes, with a dark dress and a pale face and an Oxonian caution, he leaves an impression, — the system which trained *him* must be bad. Such is our axiom. Tell an Englishman that a building is without use, and he will stare; that it is illiberal, and he will survey it; that it teaches Aristotle, and he will seem perplexed; that it don't teach science, and he won't mind: but only hint that it is the pope, and he will arise and burn it to the ground. Some one has said this concerning Oxford; so let her be wise. Without are fightings, within are fears.

Digitized by Google

LIST OF ALTERATIONS.

EXCLUSIVE OF BRACKETED ADDITIONS AND OF CHANGES TO WHICH ATTENTION IS CALLED IN FOOT-NOTES.

FIRST VOLUME.

Page 8, line 32 — "seem" for "seemed."
26, " 30 — "was" for "were."
38, " 13 — "it" added after "have."
44, " 21 — "of" added before "whom."
72, " 5 — "is" for "are."
93, " 32 — "characters" for "character."
96, " 12 — "was" for "were."
118, " 37 — "to heed" for "to have heeded."
151, " 1 — "the" added before "polished."
190, " 32 — "from" for "to."
266, " 3, 4, 5 — "are," "them," "them," for "is," "it," "it."
301, " 10 — "as" for "like."
324, " 20 — "to find" for "to have found."
417, " 36 — "live" for "lived."

SECOND VOLUME.

Page 51, line 21 — "an" for "and."
123, " 2 — "their" for "its."
130, " 28 — "of either" for "either of."
220, " 31 — "be" for "have been."
299, " 16 — "who" for "whom."

THIRD VOLUME.

Page 5, line 9 — "are" for "is."

FOURTH VOLUME.

Page 5, line 6 — "was" for "is."
5, " 26 — "palpable" and "impalpable" transposed.
12, " 3 — "without formally" for "formally without."
26, " 16 — "has" for "have."
30, " 9 — "hope" for "hoped."
35, " 11 — "legislature" for "legislative."
" " 21 — "are" for "were."
61, " 28 — "separable" for "inseparable."
64, " 16 — "Finance" for "Financial."
65, " 27 — "legislature" for "legislative."
67, " 19 — "arrest" for "assist."
88, " 34 — "-dence" for "-dent."
136, " 35 — "chose" for "choose."
138, " 31, 32 — "does" for "did" in each.
139, " 15 — "their" for "its."

Digitized by Google

Page 168, line 15—"creditor" for "debtor."
181, " 15—"it" for "them."
184, " 11—"with titles" for "with *the* titles."
191, " 32—"its" for "their."
192, " 21—"is" for "was."
239, " 9—"yourselves" for "yourself."
243, " 22—"attend" for "attended."
251, " 12—"was" for "were."
263, " 15—"shall" for "should."
306, " 30—"is" for "was."
" " 32—"provides" for "provided."
309, " 26—"should" for "shall."
324, " 21—"that" canceled before "those."
334, " 29—"or" for "and."
355, " 15—"than" for "that."
356, " 28—"it is" for "they are."
375, " 38—"in" canceled before "the."
388, " 34—"be" for "have been."
391, " 3—"place" for "have placed."
406, " 5—"dignities" for "dignitaries."
441, " 12—"polity" and "no polity" transposed, comma put before instead of after "distinct."
442, " 7, 21, 27—"polities" for "politics" in each.
445, " 4—"the" canceled before "hereditary."
448, " 16—"which" for "who."
472, " 12—"hidden" for "hid."
476, " 31—"this" for "these."
513, " 31—"their" for "his."
515, " 14—"have been" for "be."
519, " 10—"have been" for "be."
524, " 24—"or" canceled before "had."
525, " 2—"have" for "had."
526, " 33—"was" for "is."
530, " 17—"are" for "is."
" " 39—"or" for "and."
538, " 16—"so" for "how."
561, " 11—"or" for "and."
563, " 31—"polities of" for "politics or."
587, " 11—"were" for "are."

FIFTH VOLUME.

Page 71, line 30—"which" for "who."
86, " 26—"were" for "was."
112, " 16—"which (at" for "(which at."
120, " 25—"maintain" for "have maintained."
" " 26—"replenish" for "have replenished."
136, " 27—"knows" for "knew."
240, " 20—"spoke" for "spake."
290, " 5—"shall" for "should."
297, " 5—"money lender" for "money lenders."
353, " 7—"are" for "were."
359, " 22—"exist" for "exists."
377, " 31—"are" for "is."
430, " 21—"their" for "his."
526, " 2—"adopt" for "have adopted."
631, " 1—"is" for "are."

Digitized by Google

LITERARY STUDIES.

*THE FIRST EDINBURGH REVIEWERS.**

(1855.)

It is odd to hear that the *Edinburgh Review* was once thought an incendiary publication. A young generation, which has always regarded the appearance of that periodical as a grave constitutional event (and been told that its composition is intrusted to Privy Councilors only), can scarcely believe that once, grave gentlemen kicked it out of doors;† that the dignified classes murmured at "those young men" starting such views, abetting such tendencies, using *such* expressions; that aged men said, "Very clever, but not at all sound." Venerable men, too, exaggerate. People say the *Review* was planned in a garret;‡ but this is

*A Memoir of the Rev. Sydney Smith. By his Daughter, Lady Holland. With a Selection from his Letters. Edited by Mrs. Austin. 2 vols. Longmans.

Lord Jeffrey's Contributions to the *Edinburgh Review*. A New Edition, in one Volume. Longmans.

Lord Brougham's Collected Works. Vols. i., ii., iii. Lives of Philosophers of the Reign of George III. Lives of Men of Letters of the Reign of George III. Historical Sketches of the Statesmen who flourished in the Reign of George III. Griffin.

The Rev. Sydney Smith's Miscellaneous Works, including his Contributions to the *Edinburgh Review*. Longmans.

†The Earl of Buchan, a fanatical Tory Scotchman, had the number for October, 1808 (containing Jeffrey's article on Don Cevallos, which caused Scott to sever his connection with the *Edinburgh* and led to the foundation of the *Quarterly*), laid on the floor of the lobby in his Edinburgh house and the front door opened, and then solemnly kicked it into the street. See Lord Cockburn's "Life of Jeffrey," Vol. i, page 151, note. — Ed.

‡A rather intense expression, even though Jeffrey himself calls it "the dear little Lawnmarket garret." Jeffrey was poor, but many fine people lived in anything but fine quarters in old Edinburgh. — Ed.

Digitized by Google

incredible. Merely to take such a work into a garret would be inconsistent with propriety; and the tale that the original conception, the pure idea to which each number is a quarterly aspiration, ever was in a garret, is the evident fiction of reminiscent age, striving and failing to remember. *

Review writing is one of the features of modern literature: many able men really give themselves up to it. Comments on ancient writings are scarcely so common as formerly; no great part of our literary talent is devoted to the illustration of the ancient masters: but what seems at first sight less dignified, annotation on modern writings, was never so frequent. Hazlitt started the question whether it would not be as well to review works which did not appear, in lieu of those which did; wishing as a reviewer to escape the labor of perusing print, and as a man to save his fellow creatures from the slow torture of tedious extracts.† But though approximations may frequently be noticed, — though the neglect of authors and independence of critics are on the increase, — this conception, in its grandeur, has never been carried out.‡ We are surprised at first sight that writers should wish to comment on one another, — it appears a tedious mode of stating opinions, and a needless confusion of personal facts with abstract arguments: and some, especially authors who have been censured,

* For the story of its establishment, besides Sydney Smith's account in the Preface to his Works, which makes it a sort of "lark," started on a "sudden thought" like that which makes Canning's heroes "swear eternal friendship," see Jeffrey's more probable account written to Robert Chambers in 1846 (Cockburn's "Life," Vol. I., pages 109, 110), which shows that (as was likely) there were many anxious consultations and grave doubts. The meeting in his tenement was merely the first *serious* council over it. — ED.

† "Essay on Criticism," in the "Table Talk."

‡ Indeed it has, more than once. The sometime famous "Rolliad" (which existed only in the "extracts" made by its "reviewers") was one instance. A still racier one was that of "Peter's Letters to his Kinsfolk," "reviewed" with copious "extracts" by Lockhart in *Blackwood's* for February, 1819: the "review" excited so much curiosity that Lockhart and others actually wrote the book (ingeniously incorporating the "extracts"), and Blackwood published it as a "second edition." — ED.

Digitized by Google

say that the cause is laziness; that it is easier to write a review than a book; and that reviewers are, as Coleridge declared, a species of maggots, inferior to bookworms, living on the delicious brains of real genius.* Indeed, it *would* be very nice, but our world is so imperfect! This idea is wholly false. Doubtless it is easier to write one review than one book; but not, which is the real case, many reviews than one book. A deeper cause must be looked for.

In truth, review writing but exemplifies the casual character of modern literature: everything about it is temporary and fragmentary. Look at a railway stall: you see books of every color, — blue, yellow, crimson, "ring-streaked, speckled, and spotted," † — on every subject, in every style, of every opinion, with every conceivable difference, celestial or sublunary, maleficent, beneficent — but all small. People take their literature in morsels, as they take sandwiches on a journey. The volumes at least, you can see clearly, are not intended to be everlasting. It may be all very well for a pure essence like poetry to be immortal in a perishable world, — it has no feeling; but paper cannot endure it, paste cannot bear it, string has no heart for it. The race has made up its mind to be fugitive as well as minute. What a change from the ancient volume! —

> "That weight of wood, with leathern coat o'erlaid,
> Those ample clasps, of solid metal made;
> The close-pressed leaves, unclosed for many an age,
> The dull-red edging of the well-filled page;
> On the broad back the stubborn ridges rolled,
> Where yet the title stands in tarnished gold." ‡

And the change in the appearance of books has been accompanied — has been caused — by a similar

* Probably a reference to this in "The Friend," Sect. i., Essay v.: — "A numerous host of shallow heads and restless tempers, — men who . . . live as almsfolk on the opinions of their contemporaries." — ED.

† Gen. xxxi. 39.

‡ Crabbe, "The Library."

Digitized by Google

change in readers. What a transition from the student of former ages! from a grave man, with grave cheeks and a considerate eye, who spends his life in study, has no interest in the outward world, hears nothing of its din and cares nothing for its honors, who would gladly learn and gladly teach, whose whole soul is taken up with a few books of "Aristotle and his Philosophy,"—to the merchant in the railway, with a head full of sums, an idea that tallow is "up," a conviction that teas are "lively," and a mind reverting perpetually from the little volume which he reads to these mundane topics, to the railway, to the shares, to the buying and bargaining universe. We must not wonder that the outside of books is so different, when the inner nature of those for whom they are written is so changed.

It is indeed a peculiarity of our times that we must instruct so many persons. On politics, on religion, on all less important topics still more, every one thinks himself competent to think, in some casual manner does think, to the best of our means must be taught to think rightly. Even if we had a profound and far-seeing statesman, his deep ideas and long-reaching vision would be useless to us, unless we could impart a confidence in them to the mass of influential persons; to the unelected Commons, the unchosen Council, who assist at the deliberations of the nation. In religion, the appeal now is not to the technicalities of scholars or the fictions of recluse schoolmen, but to the deep feelings, the sure sentiments, the painful strivings of all who think and hope. And this appeal to the many necessarily brings with it a consequence: we must speak to the many so that they will listen, that they will like to listen, that they will understand. It is of no use addressing them with the forms of science, or the rigor of accuracy, or the tedium of exhaustive discussion. The multitude are impatient of system, desirous of brevity, puzzled by formality. They agree with Sydney Smith:—"Political economy

Digitized by Google

has become, in the hands of Malthus and Ricardo, a school of metaphysics. All seem agreed what is to be done; the contention is, how the subject is to be divided and defined. *Meddle with no such matters.*"* We are not sneering at "the last of the sciences": we are concerned with the essential doctrine, and not with the particular instance. Such is the taste of mankind.

We may repeat ourselves.

There is, as yet, no Act of Parliament compelling a *bona fide* traveler to read: if you wish him to read, you must make reading pleasant; you must give him short views and clear sentences. It will not answer to explain what all the things which you describe are *not:* you must begin by saying what they are. There is exactly the difference between the books of this age and those of a more laborious age† that we feel between the lecture of a professor and the talk of the man of the world: the former profound, systematic, suggesting all arguments, analyzing all difficulties, discussing all doubts,—very admirable, a little tedious, slowly winding an elaborate way, the characteristic effort of one who has "hived wisdom" during many "studious years,"‡ agreeable to such as he is, anything but agreeable to such as he is not; the latter the talk of the manifold talker, glancing lightly from topic to topic, suggesting deep things in a jest, unfolding unanswerable arguments in an absurd illustration, expounding nothing, completing nothing, exhausting nothing, yet really suggesting the lessons of a wider experience, embodying the results of a more finely tested philosophy, passing with a more Shakespearian transition, connecting topics with a more subtle link, refining on them with an acuter perception, and what is more to the purpose, pleasing

* There is no such passage in his writings, and his references to Malthus are all not only respectful but almost reverential. — ED.

† The order of these clauses should be inverted. — ED.

‡ "And hiving wisdom with each studious year."—Byron, "Childe Harold," Canto iii., stanza 107, describing Gibbon.

Digitized by Google

all that hear him, charming high and low, in season and out of season, with a word of illustration for each and a touch of humor intelligible to all, — fragmentary yet imparting what he says, allusive yet explaining what he intends, disconnected yet impressing what he maintains. This is the very model of our modern writing. The man of the modern world is used to speak what the modern world will hear; the writer of the modern world must write what that world will indulgently and pleasantly peruse.

In this transition from ancient writing to modern, the review-like essay and the essay-like review fill a large space. Their small bulk, their slight pretension to systematic completeness, — their avowal, it might be said, of necessary incompleteness, — the facility of changing the subject, of selecting points to attack, of exposing only the best corner for defense, are great temptations. Still greater is the advantage of "our limits." A real reviewer always spends his first and best pages on the parts of a subject on which he wishes to write, the easy comfortable parts which he knows. The formidable difficulties which he acknowledges, you foresee by a strange fatality that he will only reach two pages before the end; to his great grief, there is no opportunity for discussing them. As a young gentleman at the India House examination wrote "Time up" on nine unfinished papers in succession, so you may occasionally read a whole review, in every article of which the principal difficulty of each successive question is about to be reached at the conclusion. Nor can any one deny that this is the suitable skill, the judicious custom of the craft.

Some may be inclined to mourn over the old days of systematic arguments and regular discussion. A "field-day" controversy is a fine thing; these skirmishes have much danger and no glory. Yet there is one immense advantage: the appeal now is to the mass of sensible persons. Professed students are

Digitized by Google

not generally suspected of common-sense; and though they often show acuteness in their peculiar pursuits, they have not the various experience, the changing imagination, the feeling nature, the realized detail which are necessary data for a thousand questions. Whatever we may think on this point, however, the transition has been made. The *Edinburgh Review* was at its beginning a material step in the change. Unquestionably the *Spectator* and *Tatler*, and such like writings, had opened a similar vein; but their size was too small: they could only deal with small fragments or the extreme essence of a subject; they could not give a view of what was complicated, or analyze what was involved. The modern man must be told what to think; shortly, no doubt, but he *must* be told it. The essay-like criticism of modern times is about the length which he likes. The *Edinburgh Review*, which began the system, may be said to be, in this country, the commencement on large topics of suitable views for sensible persons.

The circumstances of the time were especially favorable to such an undertaking. Those years were the commencement of what is called the Eldonine period. The cold and haughty Pitt had gone down to the grave in circumstances singularly contrasting with his prosperous youth; and he had carried along with him the inner essence of half-liberal principle which had clung to a tenacious mind from youthful associations, and was all that remained to the Tories of abstraction or theory. As for Lord Eldon, it is the most difficult thing in the world to believe that there ever was such a man; it only shows how intense historical evidence is, that no one really doubts it. He believed in everything which it is impossible to believe in,—in the danger of Parliamentary Reform, the danger of Catholic Emancipation, the danger of altering the Court of Chancery, the danger of altering the courts of law, the danger of abolishing capital punishment for trivial thefts, the danger

Digitized by Google

of making land-owners pay their debts, the danger of making anything more, the danger of making anything less. It seems as if he maturely thought, "Now, I know the present state of things to be consistent with the existence of John Lord Eldon; but if we begin altering that state, I am sure I do not know that it will be consistent." As Sir Robert Walpole was against all committees of inquiry on the simple ground, "If they once begin that sort of thing, who knows who will be safe?"* so that great Chancellor (still remembered in his own scene) looked pleasantly down from the woolsack, and seemed to observe, "Well, it *is* a queer thing that I should be here, and here I mean to stay." With this idea, he employed for many years all the abstract intellect of an accomplished lawyer, all the practical *bonhomie* of an accomplished courtier, all the energy of both professions, all the subtlety acquired in either, in the task of maintaining John Lord Eldon in the Cabinet, and maintaining a Cabinet that would suit John Lord Eldon. No matter what change or misfortunes happened to the royal house, — whether the most important person in court politics was the old king or the young king, Queen Charlotte or Queen Caroline, whether it was a question of talking grave business to the mutton of George III. or queer stories beside the champagne of George IV., — there was the same figure. To the first he was tearfully conscientious; and at the second the old Northern Circuit stories, (how old, what outlasting tradition shall ever say?) told with a cheerful *bonhomie* and a strong conviction that they *were* ludicrous, really seem to have pleased as well as the more artificial niceties of the professed wits. He was always agreeable and always serviceable. No little peccadillo offended him: the ideal, according to the satirist, of a "good-natured man,"†

* Only when directed against himself or his adherents. Compare his conduct in the Cadogan case with that on the pension inquest or the demand on the King for his removal (Coxe, Chaps. xvii., xxxvi., lvi.). — ED.

† Hazlitt on Eldon, in the "Spirit of the Age"; see also essay on "Good Nature," in his "Table Talk."

Digitized by Google

he cared for nothing until he was himself hurt. He ever remembered the statute which absolves obedience to a king *de facto*. And it was the same in the political world: there was one man who never changed. No matter what politicians came and went, — and a good many, including several that are now scarcely remembered, did come and go, — the "Cabinet-maker," as men called him, still remained.

"'As to Lord Liverpool being Prime Minister,' continued Mr. Brougham, 'he is no more Prime Minister than I am. I reckon Lord Liverpool a sort of member of Opposition; and after what has recently passed, if I were required, I should designate him as "a noble lord in another place with whom I have the honor to act." Lord Liverpool may have collateral influence, but Lord Eldon has all the direct influence of the Prime Minister. He is Prime Minister to all intents and purposes, and he stands alone in the full exercise of all the influence of that high situation. Lord Liverpool has carried measures against the Lord Chancellor: so have I. . . . If Lord Liverpool carried the Marriage Act, I carried the Education Bill;' "*

etc., etc. And though the general views of Lord Eldon may be described, — though one can say, at least negatively and intelligibly, that he objected to everything proposed and never proposed anything himself, — the arguments are such as it would require great intellectual courage to endeavor at all to explain. What follows is a favorable specimen: —

"Lord Grey," says his biographer, "having introduced a bill for dispensing with the declarations prescribed by the Acts of 25 and of 30 Car. II. against the doctrine of Transubstantiation and against the Invocation of Saints, moved the second reading of it on the 10th of June; when the Lord Chancellor again opposed the principle of such a measure, urging that the law which had been introduced under Charles II. had been re-enacted in the first Parliament of *William III.*, the founder of our civil and religious liberties. It had been thought necessary for the preservation of these that *Papists* should not be allowed to sit in Parliament, and some test was therefore necessary by which it might be ascertained whether a man was a Catholic or a Protestant. The only possible test for

*Speech on the Scotch Appeals Bill, July 16, 1823. Hansard, and quoted (with slight variations) by both Twiss ("Life of Eldon," Vol. ii., Chap. xlv.) and Campbell ("Lives of the Lord Chancellors," Chap. ccvi.).

Digitized by Google

such a purpose was an oath declaratory of religious belief; and as *Dr. Paley* had observed,* it was perfectly just to have a religious test of a political creed. He entreated the House not to commit the crime against posterity of transmitting to them in an impaired or insecure state the civil and religious liberties of England."†

And this sort of appeal to Paley and King William is made the ground—one can hardly say the reason—for the most rigid adherence to all that was established.

It may be asked, How came the English people to endure this? They are not naturally illiberal; on the contrary, though slow and cautious, they are prone to steady improvement, and not at all disposed to acquiesce in the unlimited perfection of their rulers. On a certain imaginative side, unquestionably, there is or was a strong feeling of loyalty, of attachment to what is old, love for what is ancestral, belief in what has been tried. But the fond attachment to the past is a very different idea from a slavish adoration of the present. Nothing is more removed from the Eldonine idolatry of the *status quo* than the old Cavalier feeling of deep idolatry for the ancient realm,—that half-mystic idea that consecrated what it touched; the moonlight, as it were, which

> "Silvered the walls of Cumnor Hall,
> And many an oak that grew thereby."‡

Why, then, did the English endure the everlasting Chancellor?

The fact is, that Lord Eldon's rule was maintained a great deal on the same motives as that of Louis Napoleon. One can fancy his astonishment at hearing it said, and his cheerful rejoinder that "Whatever he was (and Mr. Brougham was in the habit of calling him strange names), no one should ever make him believe that he was a *Bonaparte.*" But in fact he was,

*"Moral and Political Philosophy," Book vi., Chap. x., near the close.

†Twiss's "Life of Eldon," Vol. i., Chap. xii.

‡Opening lines of Mickle's "Cumnor Hall," given at end of Introduction to "Kenilworth"; from Evans's "Old Ballads," Vol. iv., No. 19.

Digitized by Google

like the present Emperor, the head of what we call "the party of order." Everybody knows what keeps Louis Napoleon in his place: it is not attachment to him, but dread of what he restrains,—dread of revolution. The present may not be good, and having such newspapers—you might say no newspapers—is dreadful: but it is better than no trade, bankrupt banks, loss of old savings; your mother beheaded on destructive principles, your eldest son shot on conservative ones. Very similar was the feeling of Englishmen in the year 1800,—they had no liking at all for the French system: statesmen saw its absurdity, holy men were shocked at its impiety, mercantile men saw its effect on the five per cents., everybody was revolted by its cruelty. That it came across the Channel was no great recommendation: a witty writer of our own time says that if a still Mussulman, in his flowing robes, wished to give his son a warning against renouncing his faith, he would take the completest, smartest, dapperest French dandy out of the streets of Pera, and say, "There, my son, if ever you come to forget God and the Prophet, you may come to look like *that*." Exactly similar in old Conservative speeches is the use of the French revolution: if you proposed to alter anything, of importance or not of importance, legal or social, religious or not religious, the same answer was ready,—"You see what the French have come to. They made alterations: if we make alterations, who knows but we may end in the same way?"* It was not any peculiar bigotry in Lord Eldon that actuated him, or he would have been powerless; still less was it any affected feeling which he put forward (though doubtless he was aware of its persuasive potency, and worked on it most skillfully to his own ends): it was genuine, hearty, craven fear; and he ruled naturally the commonplace Englishman, because he

* These are almost the exact words of Gibbon in a letter to Lord Sheffield. See Vol. ii., page 56, of this edition.—Ed.

Digitized by Google

sympathized in his sentiments and excelled him in his powers.

There was, too, another cause beside fear which then inclined (and which in similar times of miscellaneous revolution will ever incline) subtle rather than creative intellects to a narrow conservatism. Such intellects require an exact creed: they want to be able clearly to distinguish themselves from those around them, to tell to each man where they differ and why they differ. They cannot make assumptions; they cannot, like the merely practical man, be content with rough and obvious axioms: they require a *theory*. Such a want it is difficult to satisfy in an age of confusion and tumult, when old habits are shaken, old views overthrown, ancient assumptions rudely questioned, ancient inferences utterly denied; when each man has a different view from his neighbor, when an intellectual change has set father and son at variance, when a man's own household are the special foes of his favorite and self-adopted creed. A bold and original mind breaks through these vexations, and forms for itself a theory satisfactory to its notions and sufficient for its wants; a weak mind yields a passive obedience to those among whom it is thrown: but a mind which is searching without being creative, which is accurate and logical enough to see defects without being combinative or inventive enough to provide remedies, — which, in the old language, is discriminative rather than discursive, — is wholly unable, out of the medley of new suggestions, to provide itself with an adequate belief; and it naturally falls back on the *status quo*. This is at least clear and simple and defined; you know at any rate what you propose, where you end, why you pause. An argumentative defense it is doubtless difficult to find: but there are arguments on all sides; the world is a medley of arguments; no one is agreed in which direction to alter the world; what is proposed is as liable to objection as what exists; nonsense for nonsense, the old should

Digitized by Google

keep its ground: and so in times of convulsion the philosophic skepticism, the ever-questioning hesitation of Hume and Montaigne, the subtlest quintessence of the most restless and refining abstraction, becomes allied to the stupidest, crudest acquiescence in the present and concrete world. We read occasionally in Conservative literature (the remark is as true of religion as of politics) alternations of sentences, the first an appeal to the coarsest prejudice, the next a subtle hint to a craving and insatiable skepticism. You may trace this even in Vesey junior. Lord Eldon never read Hume or Montaigne; but sometimes, in the interstices of cumbrous law, you may find sentences with their meaning, if not in their manner:— "Dumpor's Case always struck me as extraordinary; but if you depart from Dumpor's Case, what is there to prevent a departure in every direction?" *

The glory of the *Edinburgh Review* is, that from the first it steadily set itself to oppose this timorous acquiescence in the actual system. On domestic subjects, the history of the first thirty years of the nineteenth century is a species of duel between the *Edinburgh Review* and Lord Eldon. All the ancient abuses which he thought it most dangerous to impair, they thought it most dangerous to retain.

"To appreciate the value of the *Edinburgh Review*," says one of the founders, † "the state of England at the period when that journal began should be had in remembrance. The Catholics were not emancipated. The Corporation and Test Acts were unrepealed. The game-laws were horribly oppressive; steel-traps and spring-guns were set all over the country; prisoners tried for their lives could

* Grossly garbled to make a point against Eldon; the latter merely said (in Brummell *vs.* MacPherson, July 25, 1807; Vol. xiv. of Charles Sumner's edition of Reports of Francis Vesey, Jr.), "Though Dumpor's Case always struck me as extraordinary, it is the law of the land at this day." The point at issue was the right of an assignee of a lease to re-assign; and Eldon expressed nothing more than the principle at the bottom of all civilized law,— that the legal rights in reliance upon which business men make contracts must not be wantonly modified. It may be added that Dumpor's Case is a guiding precedent to *this* day. — ED.

† Sydney Smith, Preface to his Works.

Digitized by Google

have no counsel. Lord Eldon and the Court of Chancery pressed heavily on mankind. Libel was punished by the most cruel and vindictive imprisonments. The principles of political economy were little understood. The laws of debt and conspiracy were upon the worst footing. The enormous wickedness of the slave trade was tolerated. A thousand evils were in existence which the talents of good and able men have since lessened or removed; and these efforts have been not a little assisted by the honest boldness of the *Edinburgh Review.*"

And even more characteristic than the advocacy of these, or any other partial or particular reforms, is the systematic opposition of the *Edinburgh Review* to the crude acquiescence in the *status quo*, the timorous dislike to change because it was change; to the optimistic conclusion that "what is, ought to be"; the skeptical query, "How do you know that what you say will be any better?"

In this defense of the principle of innovation, — a defense which it requires great imagination (or, as we suggested, the looking across the Channel) to conceive the efficacy of now, — the *Edinburgh Review* was but the doctrinal organ of the Whigs. A great deal of philosophy has been expended in endeavoring to fix and express theoretically the creed of that party: various forms of abstract doctrine have been drawn out, in which elaborate sentence follows hard on elaborate sentence, to be set aside or at least vigorously questioned by the next or succeeding inquirers. In truth, Whiggism is not a creed, it is a character. Perhaps as long as there has been a political history in this country, there have been certain men of a cool, moderate, resolute firmness, not gifted with high imagination, little prone to enthusiastic sentiment, heedless of large theories and speculations, careless of dreamy skepticism; with a clear view of the next step, and a wise intention to take it; a strong conviction that the elements of knowledge are true, and a steady belief that the present world can and should be quietly improved.

Digitized by Google

These are the Whigs. A tinge of simplicity still clings to the character; of old it was the "Country Party." The limitation of their imagination is in some sort an advantage to such men: it confines them to a simple path, prevents their being drawn aside by various speculations, restricts them to what is clear and intelligible and at hand. "I cannot," said Sir S. Romilly, "be convinced without arguments, and I do not see that either Burke or Paine advance any."* He was unable to see that the most convincing arguments — and some of those in the work of Burke which he alludes to† are certainly sound enough — may be expressed imaginatively, and may work a far firmer persuasion than any neat and abstract statement. Nor are the intellectual powers of the characteristic element in this party exactly of the loftiest order: they have no call to make great discoveries, or pursue unbounded designs, or amaze the world by some wild dream of empire and renown. That terrible essence of daring genius, such as we see it in Napoleon and can imagine it in some of the conquerors of old time, is utterly removed from their cool and placid judgment. In taste they are correct, — that is, better appreciating the complete compliance with explicit and ascertained rules than the unconscious exuberance of inexplicable and unforeseen beauties. In their own writings they display the defined neatness of the second order, rather than the aspiring hardihood of the first excellence. In action they are quiet and reasonable, rather than inventive and overwhelming. Their power, indeed, is scarcely intellectual; on the contrary, it resides in what Aristotle would have called their ἦθος and we should call their "nature." They are emphatically

*Letter to Mme. G——, May 20, 1791, in Vol. i. of his "Memoirs":— "Paine's book, on the other hand, has made converts of a great many persons; which, I confess, appears to me as wonderful as the success of Burke's: for I do not understand how men can be convinced without arguments, and I find none in Paine, though I admit he has great merit."

†"Reflections upon the Revolution in France."

Digitized by Google

pure-natured and firm-natured. Instinctively casting aside the coarse temptations and crude excitements of a vulgar earth, they pass like a September breeze across the other air, cool and refreshing; unable, one might fancy, even to comprehend the many offenses with which all else is fainting and oppressed. So far even as their excellence is intellectual, it consists less in the supereminent possession of any single talent or endowment than in the simultaneous enjoyment and felicitous adjustment of many or several; in a certain balance of the faculties which we call "judgment" or "sense," which placidly indicates to them what should be done, and which is not preserved without an equable calm and a patient, persistent watchfulness. In such men the moral and intellectual nature half become one. Whether, according to the Greek question, manly virtue can be taught or not, assuredly it has never been taught to them: it seems a native endowment; it seems a soul — a soul of honor, as we speak — within the exterior soul, — a fine impalpable essence, more exquisite than the rest of the being, — as the thin pillar of the cloud, more beautiful than the other blue of heaven, governing and guiding a simple way through the dark wilderness of our world.

To descend from such elevations, among *people* Sir Samuel Romilly is the best known type of this character, — the admirable biography of him made public his admirable virtues; yet it is probable that among the aristocratic Whigs, persons as typical of the character can be found. This species of noble nature is exactly of the kind which hereditary associations tend to purify and confirm; just that casual, delicate, placid virtue which it is so hard to find, perhaps so sanguine to expect, in a rough tribune of the people. Defects enough there are in this character, on which we shall say something; yet it is wonderful to see what an influence in this sublunary sphere it gains and preserves. The world makes an

Digitized by Google

oracle of its judgment. There is a curious living instance of this: you may observe that when an ancient Liberal—Lord John Russell, or any of the essential sect—has done anything very queer, the last thing you would imagine anybody would dream of doing, and is attacked for it, he always answers boldly, "Lord Lansdowne said I *might;*" or if it is a ponderous day, the eloquence runs, "A noble friend, with whom I have ever had the inestimable advantage of being associated from the commencement (the infantile period, I might say) of my political life, and to whose advice—" etc., etc., etc.,—and a very cheerful existence it must be for "my noble friend" to be expected to justify (for they never say it except they have done something very odd) and dignify every aberration. Still, it must be a beautiful feeling to have a man like Lord John—to have a stiff, small man bowing down before you. And a good judge certainly suggested the conferring of this authority:—

"Why don't they talk over the virtues and excellences of Lansdowne? There is no man who performs the duties of life better, or fills a high station in a more becoming manner. He is full of knowledge, and eager for its acquisition. His remarkable politeness is the result of good nature, regulated by good sense. He looks for talents and qualities among all ranks of men, and adds them to his stock of society as a botanist does his plants; and while other aristocrats are yawning among Stars and Garters, Lansdowne is refreshing his soul with the fancy and genius which he has found in odd places and gathered to the marbles and pictures of his palace. Then he is an honest politician, a wise statesman, and has a philosophic mind."*

Etc., etc. Here is devotion for a carping critic; and who ever heard before of *bonhomie* in an idol?

It may strike some that this equable kind of character is not the most interesting; many will prefer the bold felicities of daring genius, the deep plans of latent and searching sagacity, the hardy triumphs

*Sydney Smith, letter to John Murray, June 4, 1843; "Memoir," Vol. ii.

Digitized by Google

of an overawing and imperious will: yet it is not unremarkable that an experienced and erudite Frenchman, not unalive to artistic effect, has just now selected this very species of character for the main figure in a large portion of an elaborate work,—the hero of M. Villemain* is one to whom he delights to ascribe such things as *bon sens, esprit juste, cœur excellent.* The result, it may be owned, is a little dull; yet it is not the less characteristic,—the instructed observer has detected the deficiency of his country. If France had more men of firm will, quiet composure, with a suspicion of enormous principle and a taste for moderate improvement,—if a Whig party, in a word, were possible in France,—France would be free. And though there are doubtless crises in affairs, dark and terrible moments, when a more creative intellect is needful to propose, a more dictatorial will is necessary to carry out, a sudden and daring resolution; though in times of inextricable confusion—perhaps the present is one of them†—a more abstruse and disentangling intellect is required to untwist the raveled perplexities of a complicated world,—yet England will cease to be the England of our fathers when a large share in great affairs is no longer given to the equable sense, the composed resolution, the homely purity of the characteristic Whigs.

It is evident that between such men and Lord Eldon there could be no peace; and between them and the *Edinburgh Review* there was a natural alliance. Not only the kind of reforms there proposed, the species of views therein maintained, but the very manner in which those views and alterations are put forward and maintained, is just what they would like. The kind of writing suitable to such minds is not the elaborate, ambitious, exhaustive

* Evidently meaning Count Louis de Narbonne (in Villemain's "Souvenirs Contemporaines"), minister of Louis XVI. and holding various positions under Napoleon.—ED.

† Just after the capture of Sebastopol.—ED.

Digitized by Google

discussion of former ages, but the clear, simple, occasional writing (as we just now described it) of the present times. The opinions to be expressed are short and simple, the innovations suggested are natural and evident: neither one nor the other require more than an intelligible statement, a distinct exposition to the world, and their reception would be only impeded and complicated by operose and cumbrous argumentation. The exact mind which of all others dislikes the stupid adherence to the *status quo* is the keen, quiet, improving Whig mind; the exact kind of writing most adapted to express that dislike is the cool, pungent, didactic essay.

Equally common to the Whigs and the *Edinburgh Review* is the enmity to the skeptical, over-refining Toryism of Hume and Montaigne. The Whigs, it is true, have a conservatism of their own; but it instinctively clings to certain practical rules tried by steady adherence, to appropriate formulæ verified by the regular application and steady success of many ages. Political philosophers speak of it as a great step when the idea of an attachment to an organized code and system of rules and laws takes the place of the exclusive Oriental attachment to the person of the single monarch: this step is natural, is instinctive, to the Whig mind. That cool, impassive intelligence is little likely to yield to ardent emotions of personal loyalty; but its chosen ideal is a body or collection of wise rules fitly applicable to great affairs, pleasing a placid sense by an evident propriety, gratifying the capacity for business by a constant and clear applicability. The Whigs are constitutional by instinct, as the Cavaliers were monarchical by devotion; it has been a jest at their present leader* that he is over-familiar with public forms and parliamentary rites. The first wish of the Whigs is to retain the Constitution; the second — and it is of almost equal strength — is to improve it. They think the body

* Lord Palmerston.

Digitized by Google

of laws now existing to be, in the main and in its essence, excellent; but yet that there are exceptional defects which should be remedied, superficial inconsistencies that should be corrected. The most opposite creed is that of the skeptic who teaches that you are to keep what is because it exists; not from a conviction of its excellence, but from an uncertainty that anything better can be obtained. The one is an attachment to precise rules for specific reasons; the other an acquiescence in the present on grounds that would be equally applicable to its very opposite, — from a disbelief in the possibility of improvement and a conviction of the uncertainty of all things. And equally adverse to an unlimited skepticism is the nature of popular writing. It is true that the greatest teachers of that creed have sometimes, and as it were of set purpose, adopted that species of writing; yet essentially it is inimical to them. Its appeal is to the people: as has been shown, it addresses the *élite* of common men, sensible in their affairs, intelligent in their tastes, influential among their neighbors. What is absolute skepticism to such men? a dream, a chimera, an inexplicable absurdity; tell it to them to-day, and they will have forgotten it to-morrow. A man of business hates elaborate trifling: "If you do not believe *your own* senses," he will say, "there is no use in *my* talking to you." As to the multiplicity of arguments and the complexity of questions, he feels them little: he has a plain, simple — as he would say, "practical" — way of looking at the matter, and you will never make him comprehend any other; he knows the world *can* be improved. And thus what we may call the middle species of writing, which is intermediate between the light, frivolous style of merely amusing literature and the heavy, conscientious elaborateness of methodical philosophy, — the style of the original *Edinburgh*, — is in truth as opposed to the vague, desponding conservatism of the skeptic as it is to the stupid conservatism of the

Digitized by Google

crude and uninstructed; and substantially for the same reason,—that it is addressed to men of cool, clear, and practical understandings.

It is indeed no wonder that the *Edinburgh Review* should be agreeable to the Whigs; for the people who founded it were Whigs. Among these, three stand pre-eminent,—Horner, Jeffrey, and Sydney Smith. Other men of equal ability may have contributed—and a few did contribute—to its pages; but these men were, more than any one else, the first *Edinburgh Review*.

Francis Horner's was a short and singular life. He was the son of an Edinburgh shopkeeper; he died at thirty-nine: and when he died, from all sides of the usually cold House of Commons great statesmen and thorough gentlemen got up to deplore his loss. Tears are rarely parliamentary; all men are arid towards young Scotchmen: yet it was one of that inclement nation whom statesmen of the species Castlereagh and statesmen of the species Whitbread—with all the many kinds and species that lie between the two—rose in succession to lament. The fortunes and superficial aspect of the man make it more singular. He had no wealth, was a briefless barrister, never held an office, was a conspicuous member of the most unpopular of all Oppositions,—the opposition to a glorious and successful war. He never had the means of obliging any one. He was destitute of showy abilities: he had not the intense eloquence or overwhelming ardor which enthrall and captivate popular assemblies; his powers of administration were little tried, and may possibly be slightly questioned. In his youthful reading he was remarkable for laying down, for a few months of study, enormous plans, such as many years would scarcely complete; and not especially remarkable for doing anything wonderful towards accomplishing those plans. Sir Walter Scott, who, though not illiberal in his essential intellect, was a keen partisan on superficial matters,

Digitized by Google

and no lenient critic on actual Edinburgh Whigs, used to observe, "I will not admire your Horner: he always put me in mind of Obadiah's bull,* who, though he never produced a calf, went through his business with such a grave demeanor that he always maintained his credit in the parish."† It is no explanation of the universal regret, that he was a considerable political economist: no real English gentleman, in his secret soul, was ever sorry for the death of a political economist; he is much more likely to be sorry for his life. There is an idea that he has something to do with statistics: or if that be exploded, that he is a person who writes upon "value"; says that rent is—you cannot very well make out what; talks excruciating currency: he may be useful, as drying machines are useful,‡ but the notion of crying about him is absurd. The economical loss might be great, but it will not explain the mourning for Francis Horner.

The fact is, that Horner is a striking example of the advantage of keeping an atmosphere. This may sound like nonsense, and yet it is true: there is around some men a kind of circle or halo of influences and traits and associations, by which they infallibly leave a distinct and uniform impression on all their contemporaries. It is very difficult, even for those who have the best opportunities, to analyze exactly what this impression consists in, or why it was made; but it *is* made,—there is a certain undefinable keeping in the traits and manner and common speech and characteristic actions of some men, which inevitably stamps the same mark and image. It is like a man's style: there are some writers who can be known by a few words of their writing;

* See last chapter of "Tristram Shandy."

† Said to Jeffrey at a dinner; Lockhart, Vol. ii., Chap. v., near the close.

‡ "Horner is ill. He was desired to read amusing books: upon searching his library, it appeared he had no amusing books,—the nearest of any work of that description being the 'Indian Trader's Complete Guide'!"—Sydney Smith to Lady Holland, Jan. 10, 1809.—B.

Digitized by Google

each syllable is instinct with a certain spirit; put it into the hands of any one chosen at random, the same impression will be produced by the same casual and felicitous means. Just so in character: the air and atmosphere, so to speak, which are around a man, have a delicate and expressive power, and leave a stamp of unity on the interpretative faculty of mankind. Death dissolves this association, and it becomes a problem for posterity what it was that contemporaries observed and reverenced. There is Lord Somers: does any one know why he had such a reputation? He was Lord Chancellor, and decided a Bank case, and had an influence in the Cabinet; but there have been Lord Chancellors and Bank cases and influential Cabinet ministers not a few, that have never attained to a like reputation. There is little we can connect specifically with his name. Lord Macaulay, indeed, says that he spoke for five minutes on the Bishops' trial, and that when he sat down his reputation as an orator and constitutional lawyer was established.* But this must be a trifle eloquent; hardly any orator could be fast enough to attain such a reputation in five minutes. The truth is, that Lord Somers had around him that inexpressible attraction and influence of which we speak. He left a sure—and if we may trust the historian, even a momentary—impression on those who saw him; by a species of tact they felt him to be a great man; the ethical sense—for there is almost such a thing in simple persons—discriminated the fine and placid oneness of his nature. It was the same on a smaller scale with Horner. After he had left Edinburgh several years, his closest and most confidential associate writes to him:—

"There is no circumstance in your life, my dear Horner, so enviable as the universal confidence which your conduct has produced among all descriptions of men. I do not speak of your friends, who have been close and near observers; but I have had

* History of England, Vol. ii., Chap. viii., near the close.

Digitized by Google

some occasions of observing the impression which those who are distant spectators have had, and I believe there are few instances of any person of your age possessing the same character for independence and integrity, — qualities for which very little credit is given in general to young men."*

Sydney Smith said, "The Commandments were written on his face."† Of course he was a very ugly man, but the moral impression in fact conveyed was equally efficacious.

"I have often," said the same most just observer, "told him there was not a crime he might not commit with impunity, as no judge or jury who saw him would give the smallest degree of credit to any evidence against him. There was in his look a calm, settled love of all that was honorable and good, — an air of wisdom and of sweetness: you saw at once that he was a great man, whom nature had intended for a leader of human beings; you ranged yourself willingly under his banners, and cheerfully submitted to his sway."‡

From the somewhat lengthened description of what we defined as the essential Whig character, it is evident how agreeable and suitable such a man was to their quiet, composed, and aristocratic nature. His tone was agreeable to English gentlemen, — a firm and placid manliness, without effort or pretension, is what they like best; and therefore it was that the House of Commons grieved for his loss, unanimously and without distinction.

Some friends of Horner's, in his own time, mildly criticized him for a tendency to party spirit. The disease in him, if real, was by no means virulent; but it is worth noticing as one of the defects to which the proper Whig character is specially prone. It is evident in the quiet agreement of the men. Their composed, unimaginative nature is inclined to isolate itself in a single view; their placid disposition, never prone to self-distrust, is rather susceptible

*Letter from Lord Murray, Nov. 25, 1806; in "Memoirs of Horner," Vol. i.

†Letter to Horner's brother, Aug. 26, 1842; in "Tributes," latter part of Vol. ii. of "Memoirs of Horner."

‡Ibid.

Digitized by Google

of friendly influence; their practical habit is concentrated on what should be done. They do not wish, they do not like, to go forth into various speculation, to put themselves in the position of opponents, to weigh in a refining scale the special weight of small objections. Their fancy is hardly vivid enough to explain to them all the characters of those whom they oppose; their intellect scarcely detective enough to discover a meaning for each grain in opposing arguments. Nor is their temper, it may be, always prone to be patient with propositions which tease and persons who resist them: the wish to call down fire from heaven is rarely absent in pure zeal for a pure cause.

A good deal of praise has naturally been bestowed upon the Whigs for adopting such a man as Horner, with Romilly and others of that time; and much excellent eulogy has been expended on the close boroughs, which afforded to the Whig leaders a useful mode of showing their favor. Certainly the character of Horner was one altogether calculated to ingratiate itself with the best and most special Whig nature; but as for the eulogy on the proprietary seats in Parliament, it is certain that from the position of the Whig party, the nomination system was then most likely to show its excellences and to conceal its defects. Nobody but an honest man would bind himself thoroughly to the Whigs. It was evident that the reign of Lord Eldon must be long; the heavy and common Englishman (after all, the most steady and powerful force in our political constitution) had been told that Lord Grey was in favor of the "Papists," and liked Bonaparte: and the consequence was a long, painful, arduous exile on "the other side of the table,"—the last place any political adventurer would wish to arrive at. Those who have no bribes will never charm the corrupt; those who have nothing to give will not please those who desire that much shall be given them. There

Digitized by Google

is an observation of Niel Blane, the innkeeper, in "Old Mortality": — "'And what are we to eat ourselves, then, father,' asked Jenny, 'when we hae sent awa the haill meal in the ark and the girnel?' 'We maun gar wheat flour serve us for a blink,' said Niel, in a tone of resignation. 'It's no that ill food, though far frae being sae hearty or kindly to a Scotchman's stamach as the curney aitmeal is: the Englishers live amaist upon't,'"* etc. It was so with the Whigs, — they were obliged to put up with honest and virtuous men, and they wanted able men to carry on a keen opposition; and after all, they and the "Englishers" liked such men best.

In another point of view, too, Horner's life was characteristic of those times. It might seem, at first sight, odd that the English Whigs should go to Scotland to find a literary representative: there was no place where Toryism was so intense. The constitution of Scotland at that time has been described as the worst constitution in Europe: the nature of the representation made the entire country a government borough. In the towns, the franchise belonged to a close and self-electing corporation, who were always carefully watched; the county representation, anciently resting on a property qualification, had become vested in a few titular freeholders, — something like lords of the manor, only that they might have no manor, — and these, even with the addition of the borough freeholders, did not amount to three thousand.† The whole was in the hands of Lord Eldon's party, and the entire force, influence, and patronage of government were spent to maintain and keep it so. By inevitable consequence, Liberalism even of the most moderate kind was thought almost a criminal offense. The mild Horner was considered a man of "very violent opinions"‡; Jeffrey's father, a careful and discerning parent, was so anxious to shield him from

*Chap. xx. †2488. See Vol. iv., page 379. — Ed.

‡"Violent political opinions." — Lady Holland's "Memoirs of Sydney Smith," Chap. ii.

Digitized by Google

the intellectual taint as to forbid his attendance at Stewart's lectures. This seems an odd place to find the eruption of a Liberal review. Of course the necessary effect of a close and commonplace tyranny was to engender a strong reaction in searching and vigorous minds,—the Liberals of the North, though far fewer, may perhaps have been stronger Liberals than those of the South; but this will hardly explain the phenomenon. The reason is an academical one: the teaching of Scotland seems to have been designed to teach men to write essays and articles. There are two kinds of education, into all the details of which it is not now pleasant to go, but which may be adequately described as the education of facts and the education of speculation. The system of facts is the English system: the strength of the pedagogue and the agony of the pupil are designed to engender a good knowledge of two languages; in the old times, a little arithmetic; now also a knowledge, more or less, of mathematics and mathematical physics. The positive tastes and tendencies of the English mind confine its training to ascertained learning and definite science. In Scotland the case has long been different: the time of a man like Horner was taken up with speculations like these:—

"I have long been feeding my ambition with the prospect of accomplishing, at some future period of my life, a work similar to that which Sir Francis Bacon executed almost two hundred years ago. It will depend upon the success and turn of my speculations, whether they shall be thrown into the form of a discursive commentary on the 'Instauratio Magna' of that illustrious author, or shall be entitled to an original form, under the title of a 'View of the Limits of Human Knowledge, and a System of the Principles of Philosophical Inquiry.' I shall say nothing at present of the audacity—"

etc., etc.* And this sort of planning, which is the staple of his youthful biography, was really accompanied by much application to metaphysics, history,

* Journal, Feb. 2, 1800; "Memoirs," Vol. i.

Digitized by Google

political economy, and such like studies. It is not at all to our present purpose to compare this speculative and indeterminate kind of study with the rigorous accurate education of England. The fault of the former is sometimes to produce a sort of lecturer *in vacuo*, ignorant of exact pursuits and diffusive of vague words; the English now and then produce a learned creature like a thistle, prickly with all facts and incapable of all fruit. But passing by this general question, it cannot be doubted that as a preparation for the writing of various articles, the system of Edinburgh is enormously superior to that of Cambridge. The particular, compact, exclusive learning of England is inferior in this respect to the general, diversified, omnipresent information of the North; and what is more, the speculative, dubious nature of metaphysical and such like pursuits tends, in a really strong mind, to cultivate habits of independent thought and original discussion. A bold mind so trained will even *wish* to advance its peculiar ideas, on its own account, in a written and special form; that is, as we said, to write an article. Such are the excellences in this respect of the system of which Horner is an example. The defects tend the same way: it tends, as is said, to make a man fancy he knows everything; "Well, then, at least," it may be answered, "I can write an article on everything."

The facility and boldness of the habits so produced were curiously exemplified in Lord Jeffrey. During the first six years of the *Edinburgh Review* he wrote as many as seventy-nine articles; in a like period afterwards he wrote forty. Any one who should expect to find a pure perfection in these miscellaneous productions should remember their bulk. If all his reviews were reprinted, they would be very many.* And all the while he was a busy lawyer, was editor of the *Review*, did the business, corrected

* There were just 200 in all. See list at end of Vol. i. of Cockburn's "Life." — ED.

Digitized by Google

the proof sheets; and more than all — what one would have thought a very strong man's work — actually managed Henry Brougham. You must not criticize papers like these, rapidly written in the hurry of life, as you would the painful words of an elaborate sage, slowly and with anxious awfulness instructing mankind. Some things, a few things, are for eternity; some, and a good many, are for time. We do not expect the everlastingness of the Pyramids from the vibratory grandeur of a Tyburnian mansion.

The truth is, that Lord Jeffrey was something of a Whig critic. We have hinted that among the peculiarities of that character, an excessive partiality for new, arduous, overwhelming, original excellence was by no means to be numbered: their tendency inclining to the quiet footsteps of custom, they like to trace the exact fulfillment of admitted rules, a just accordance with the familiar features of ancient merit. But they are most averse to mysticism: a clear, precise, discriminating intellect shrinks at once from the symbolic, the unbounded, the indefinite. The misfortune is, that mysticism is true. There certainly are kinds of truth, borne in as it were instinctively on the human intellect, most influential on the character and the heart, yet hardly capable of stringent statement, difficult to limit by an elaborate definition. Their course is shadowy; the mind seems rather to have seen than to see them, more to feel after than definitely apprehend them. They commonly involve an infinite element, which of course cannot be stated precisely; or else a first principle — an original tendency — of our intellectual constitution, which it is impossible not to feel, and yet which it is hard to extricate in terms and words. Of this latter kind is what has been called the "religion of nature"; or more exactly, perhaps, the religion of the imagination. This is an interpretation of the world; according to it, the beauty of the universe has a meaning, its grandeur a soul, its sublimity an

Digitized by Google

expression. As we gaze on the faces of those whom we love; as we watch the light of life in the dawning of their eyes and the play of their features and the wildness of their animation; as we trace in changing lineaments a varying sign; as a charm and a thrill seem to run along the tone of a voice, to haunt the mind with a mere word; as a tone seems to roam in the ear; as a trembling fancy hears words that are unspoken, — so in nature the mystical sense finds a motion in the mountain, and a power in the waves, and a meaning in the long white line of the shore, and a thought in the blue of heaven, and a gushing soul in the buoyant light, an unbounded being in the vast void air, and

"Wakeful watchings in the pointed stars."

There is a philosophy in this which might be explained, if explaining were to our purpose: it might be advanced that there are original sources of expression in the essential grandeur and sublimity of nature, of an analogous (though fainter) kind to those familiar, inexplicable signs by which we trace in the very face and outward lineaments of man the existence and working of the mind within. But be this as it may, it is certain that Mr. Wordsworth preached this kind of religion, and that Lord Jeffrey did not believe a word of it: his cool, sharp, collected mind revolted from its mysticism, his detective intelligence was absorbed in its apparent fallaciousness, his light humor made sport with the sublimities of the preacher; his love of perspicuity was vexed by its indefiniteness, the precise philosopher was amazed at its mystic unintelligibility. Finding a little fault was doubtless not unpleasant to him: the reviewer's pen — *φόνος ἡρώεσσιν** — has seldom been more poignantly wielded. "If," he was told, "you could be alarmed into the semblance of modesty, you would charm

* "Death to heroes."

Digitized by Google

everybody; but remember my joke against you" (Sydney Smith *loquitur*) "about the moon: 'D—n the solar system! bad light—planets too distant—pestered with comets: feeble contrivance; could make a better with great ease.'" * Yet we do not mean that in this great literary feud, either of the combatants had all the right or gained all the victory. The world has given judgment; both Mr. Wordsworth and Lord Jeffrey have received their reward. The one had his own generation, the laughter of men, the applause of drawing-rooms, the concurrence of the crowd; the other a succeeding age, the fond enthusiasm of secret students, the lonely rapture of lonely minds. And each has received according to his kind. If all cultivated men speak differently because of the existence of Wordsworth and Coleridge; if not a thoughtful English book has appeared for forty years without some trace, for good or evil, of their influence; if sermon writers subsist upon their thoughts; if "sacred poets" thrive by translating their weaker portion into the speech of women; if, when all this is over, some sufficient part of their writing will ever be fitting food for wild musing and solitary meditation,—surely this is because they possessed the inner nature, "an intense and glowing mind," "the vision and the faculty divine." † But if perchance in their weaker moments the great authors of the "Lyrical Ballads" did ever imagine that the world was to pause because of their verses; that "Peter Bell" would be popular in drawing-rooms, that "Christabel" would be perused in the City, that people of fashion would make a handbook of the "Excursion,"—it was well for them to be told at once that this was not so. Nature ingeniously prepared a shrill artificial voice, which spoke in season and out of season, enough and more than enough, what will ever be the idea of the cities of the plain concerning those who live alone among

* Letter 17, ——, 1806; "Memoir," Vol. ii.

† Wordsworth, "Excursion," Book i.

Digitized by Google

the mountains, of the frivolous concerning the grave, of the gregarious concerning the recluse, of those who laugh concerning those who laugh not, of the common concerning the uncommon, of those who lend on usury concerning those who lend not, the notion of the world of those whom it will not reckon among the righteous, — it said, "This won't do!"* And so in all time will the lovers of polished Liberalism speak, concerning the intense and lonely prophet.

Yet if Lord Jeffrey had the natural infirmities of a Whig critic, he certainly had also its extrinsic and political advantages. Especially at Edinburgh the Whigs wanted a literary man. The Liberal party in Scotland had long groaned under political exclusion; they had suffered, with acute mortification, the heavy sway of Henry Dundas: but they had been compensated by a literary supremacy, — in the book world they enjoyed a domination. On a sudden this was rudely threatened: the fame of Sir Walter Scott was echoed from the Southern world, and appealed to every national sentiment, — to the inmost heart of every Scotchman. And what a ruler! a lame Tory, a jocose Jacobite, a laugher at Liberalism, a scoffer at metaphysics, an unbeliever in political economy! What a Gothic ruler for the modern Athens! was this man to reign over them? It would not have been like human nature if a strong and intellectual party had not soon found a clever and noticeable rival. Poets, indeed, are not made "to order"; but Byron, speaking the sentiment of his time and circle, counted reviewers their equals. If a Tory produced "Marmion," a Whig wrote the best article upon it: Scott might (so ran Liberal speech) be the best living writer of fiction, Jeffrey clearly was the most shrewd and accomplished of literary critics.

*The first words of Jeffrey's review of the "Excursion" are, "This will never do." — B. Excoriated *ad nauseam*. It was the opening article in the *Edinburgh* for November, 1814. — Ed.

Digitized by Google

And though this was an absurd delusion, Lord Jeffrey was no every-day man. He invented the trade of editorship: before him an editor was a bookseller's drudge, he is now a distinguished functionary. If Jeffrey was not a great critic, he had what very great critics have wanted, — the art of writing what most people would think good criticism. He might not know his subject, but he knew his readers: people like to read ideas which they can imagine to have been their own. "Why does Scarlett always persuade the jury?" asked a rustic gentleman. "Because there are twelve Scarletts in the jury-box," replied an envious advocate.* What Scarlett was in law, Jeffrey was in criticism: he could become that which his readers could not avoid being. He was neither a pathetic writer nor a profound writer; but he was a quick-eyed, bustling, black-haired, sagacious, agreeable man of the world. He had his day, and was entitled to his day; but a gentle oblivion must now cover his already subsiding reputation.

Sydney Smith was an after-dinner writer: his words have a flow, a vigor, an expression, which is not given to hungry mortals; you seem to read of good wine, of good cheer, of beaming and buoyant enjoyment. There is little trace of labor in his composition: it is poured forth like an unceasing torrent, rejoicing daily to run its course. And what courage there is in it! There is as much variety of pluck in writing across a sheet as in riding across a country. Cautious men have many adverbs, "usually," "nearly," "almost": safe men begin, "It may be advanced —"; you never know precisely what their premises are nor what their conclusion is; they go tremulously like a timid rider; they turn hither and thither; they do not go straight across a subject, like a masterly mind. A few sentences are enough for a master of sentences; a practical topic wants rough vigor and strong exposition. This is the writing of

*"A thirteenth juryman." — Brougham, "Statesmen of George III."

Digitized by Google

Sydney Smith; it is suited to the broader kind of important questions. For anything requiring fine nicety of speculation, long elaborateness of deduction, evanescent sharpness of distinction, neither his style nor his mind was fit: he had no patience for long argument, no acuteness for delicate precision, no fangs for recondite research. Writers, like teeth, are divided into incisors and grinders; Sydney Smith was a molar: he did not run a long sharp argument into the interior of a question; he did not, in the common phrase, go deeply into it: but he kept it steadily under the contact of a strong, capable, heavy, jaw-like understanding, — pressing its surface, effacing its intricacies, grinding it down. Yet as we said, this is done without toil: the play of the molar is instinctive and placid; he could not help it; it would seem that he had an enjoyment in it.

The story is, that he liked a bright light; that when he was a poor parson in the country he used, not being able to afford more delicate luminaries, to adorn his drawing-room with a hundred little lamps of tin metal and mutton fat.* When you know this, you see it in all his writings: there is the same preference of perspicuity throughout them; elegance, fine savor, sweet illustration, are quite secondary. His only question as to an argument was, "Will it tell?" as to an example, "Will it exemplify?" Like what is called "push" in a practical man, his style goes straight to its object: it is not restrained by the gentle hindrances, the delicate decorums of refining natures. There is nothing more characteristic of the Scandinavian mythology than that it had a god with a hammer; you have no better illustration of our English humor than the great success of this huge and healthy organization.

There is something about this not exactly to the Whig taste: they do not like such broad fun, and rather dislike unlimited statement. Lord Melbourne,

*Lady Holland's "Memoir," Chaps. vi., ix.

Digitized by Google

it is plain, declined to make him a bishop:* in this there might be a vestige of Canningite prejudice; but on the whole, there was the distinction between the two men which there is between the loud wit and the *recherché* thinker, between the bold controversialist and the discriminative statesman. A refined *noblesse* can hardly respect a humorist: he amuses them, and they like him, but they are puzzled to know whether he does not laugh at them as well as with them; and the notion of being laughed at, ever or on any score, is alien to their shy decorum and suppressed pride. But in a broader point of view, and taking a wider range of general character, there was a good deal in common: more than any one else, Sydney Smith was Liberalism in life. Somebody has defined Liberalism as "the spirit of the world": it represents its genial enjoyment, its wise sense, its steady judgment, its preference of the near to the far, of the seen to the unseen; it represents, too, its shrinking from difficult dogma, from stern statement, from imperious superstition. What health is to the animal, Liberalism is to the polity: it is a principle of fermenting enjoyment, running over all the nerves, inspiring the frame, happy in its mind, easy in its place, glad to behold the sun. All this Sydney Smith, as it were, personified. The biography just published of him will be very serviceable to his fame: he has been regarded too much as a fashionable jester and metropolitan wit of society; we have now for the first time a description of him as he was,—equally at home in the crude world of Yorkshire and amid the quintessential refinements of Mayfair. It is impossible to believe that he did not give the epithet to his parish: it is now called Foston *le Clay*. It was a "mute inglorious"† Sydney of the district

*And said it was one of the things he was sorriest for in memory; but Sydney always declared he would not have taken the position. "Memoir," Chap. ix.—Ed.

†"Some mute inglorious Milton."—Gray's "Elegy."

Digitized by Google

that invented the name, if it is really older than the century: the place has an obtuse soil, inhabited by stiff-clayed Yorkshiremen. There was nobody in the parish to speak to, only peasants, farmers, and such like (what the clergy call "parishioners"), and an old clerk who thought every one who came from London a fool, "but you, Mr. Smith, I see you are no fool."* This was the sort of life:—

"I turned schoolmaster to educate my son, as I could not afford to send him to school. Mrs. Sydney turned schoolmistress to educate my girls, as I could not afford a governess. I turned farmer, as I could not let my land. A man-servant was too expensive, so I caught up a little garden-girl made like a milestone, christened her 'Bunch,' put a napkin in her hand, and made her my butler; the girls taught her to read, Mrs. Sydney to wait, and I undertook her morals: Bunch became the best butler in the county.

"I had little furniture, so I bought a cart-load of deals; took a carpenter (who came to me for parish relief), called Jack Robinson, with a face like a full moon, into my service; established him in a barn, and said, 'Jack, furnish my house.' You see the result!

"At last it was suggested that a carriage was much wanted in the establishment. After diligent search, I discovered in the back settlements of a York coach-maker an ancient green chariot, supposed to have been the earliest invention of the kind; I brought it home in triumph to my admiring family. Being somewhat dilapidated, the village tailor lined it, the village blacksmith repaired it: nay, but for Mrs. Sydney's earnest entreaties, we believe the village painter would have exercised his genius upon the exterior; it escaped this danger, however, and the result was wonderful. Each year added to its charms; it grew younger and younger; a new wheel, a new spring; I christened it the *Immortal;* it was known all over the neighborhood; the village boys cheered it, and the village dogs barked at it: but '*Fuber meæ fortunæ*' was my motto, and we had no false shame.

"Added to all these domestic cares, I was village parson, village doctor, village comforter, village magistrate, and *Edinburgh-Reviewer;* so you see I had not much time left on my hands to regret London."†

It is impossible that this should not at once remind us of the life of Sir Walter Scott: there is the

*"Memoir," Chap. v. †Ibid., Chap. vii.

Digitized by Google

same strong sense, the same glowing, natural pleasure, the same power of dealing with men, the same power of diffusing common happiness. Both enjoyed as much in a day as an ordinary man in a month. The term "animal spirits" peculiarly expresses this bold enjoyment: it seems to come from a principle intermediate between the mind and the body, — to be hardly intellectual enough for the soul, and yet too permeating and aspiring for crude matter. Of course there is an immense imaginative world in Scott's existence to which Sydney Smith had no claim: but they met upon the present world; they enjoyed the spirit of life; "they loved the world, and the world them;"* they did not pain themselves with immaterial speculation, — roast beef was an admitted fact. A certain, even excessive practical caution which is ascribed to the Englishman, † Scott would have been the better for; yet his biography would have been the worse. There is nothing in the life before us comparable in interest to the tragic, gradual cracking of the great mind; the overtasking of the great capital, and the ensuing failure; the spectacle of heaving genius breaking in the contact with misfortune. The anticipation of this pain increases the pleasure of the reader; the commencing threads of coming calamity shade the woof of pleasure; the proximity of suffering softens the ὕβρις, — the terrible, fatiguing energy of enjoyment.

A great deal of excellent research has been spent on the difference between "humor" and "wit"; into which metaphysical problem "our limits," of course, forbid us to enter. There is, however, between them the distinction of dry sticks and green sticks. There is in humor a living energy, a diffused potency, a

*"I have not loved the world, nor the world me." — Byron, "Childe Harold," Canto iii., stanzas cxiii., cxiv.

†Besides the tributes to his business sagacity and thrift in his daughter's Memoir, Jeffrey says (in the letter before referred to) that he was the most despondent of all about the *Review*, though he was the first to suggest its establishment. — ED.

Digitized by Google

noble sap; it grows upon the character of the humorist. Wit is part of the machinery of the intellect; as Madame de Staël says, "La gaieté de l'esprit est facile à tous les hommes qui ont de l'esprit."* We wonder Mr. Babbage does not invent a punning engine: it is just as possible as a calculating one. Sydney Smith's mirth was essentially humorous: it clings to the character of the man; as with the sayings of Dr. Johnson, there is a species of personality attaching to it; the word is more graphic because Sydney Smith — that man being the man that he was — said it, than it would have been if said by any one else. In a desponding moment, he would have it he was none the better for the jests which he made, any more than a bottle for the wine which passed through it: this is a true description of many a wit, but he was very unjust in attributing it to himself.

Sydney Smith is often compared to Swift; but this only shows with how little thought our common criticism is written. The two men have really nothing in common, except that they were both high in the Church and both wrote amusing letters about Ireland. Of course, to the great constructive and elaborative power displayed in Swift's longer works, Sydney Smith has no pretension, — he could not have written "Gulliver's Travels"; but so far as the two series of Irish letters goes, it seems plain that he has the advantage. "Plymley's" letters are true: the treatment may be incomplete, — the Catholic religion may have latent dangers and insidious attractions which are not there mentioned, — but the main principle is sound; the common-sense of religious toleration is hardly susceptible of better explanation. "Drapier's" letters, on the contrary, are essentially absurd; they are a clever appeal to ridiculous prejudices. Who cares now for a disputation on the evils to be apprehended a hundred years ago from adulterated

*"Gayety of spirit is easy to all spirited men." — "De la Littérature," Chap. xiv., second paragraph.

Digitized by Google

halfpence, especially when we know that the halfpence were not adulterated, and that if they had been, those evils would never have arisen? Any one, too, who wishes to make a collection of currency crotchets, will find those letters worth his attention. No doubt there is a clever affectation of common-sense, as in all of Swift's political writings, and the style has an air of business; yet on the other hand, there are no passages which any one would now care to quote for their manner and their matter, and there are many in "Plymley" that will be constantly cited so long as existing controversies are at all remembered. The whole genius of the two writers is emphatically opposed. Sydney Smith's is the ideal of popular, buoyant, riotous fun: it cries and laughs with boisterous mirth; it rolls hither and thither like a mob, with elastic and commonplace joy. Swift was a detective in a dean's wig: he watched the mob; his whole wit is a kind of dexterous indication of popular frailties; he hated the crowd; he was a spy on beaming smiles, and a common informer against genial enjoyment. His whole essence was a soreness against mortality. Show him innocent mirth, he would say, How absurd! He was painfully wretched, no doubt, in himself. Perhaps, as they say, he had no heart: but his mind, his brain had a frightful capacity for secret pain; his sharpness was the sharpness of disease, his power the sore acumen of morbid wretchedness. It is impossible to fancy a parallel more proper to show the excellence, the unspeakable superiority of a buoyant and bounding writer.

At the same time, it is impossible to give to Sydney Smith the highest rank even as a humorist. Almost all his humor has reference to the incongruity of special means to special ends. The notion of "Plymley" is want of conformity between the notions of "my brother Abraham" and the means of which he makes use; of the quiet clergyman, who was always told he was a bit of a goose, advocating

Digitized by Google

conversion by muskets and stopping Bonaparte by Peruvian bark. The notion of the letters to Archdeacon Singleton is, a bench of bishops placidly and pleasantly destroying the Church. It is the same with most of his writings: even when there is nothing absolutely practical in the idea, the subject is from the scenery of practice, from concrete entities, near institutions, superficial facts. You might quote a hundred instances; here is one:—"A gentleman, in speaking of a nobleman's wife of great rank and fortune, lamented very much that she had no children. A medical gentleman who was present observed that to have no children was a great misfortune, but he had often observed it was *hereditary* in families."* This is what we mean by saying his mirth lies in the superficial relations of phenomena (some will say we are pompous, like the medical man); in the relation of one external fact to another external fact, of one detail of common life to another detail of common life. But this is not the highest topic of humor. Taken as a whole, the universe is absurd; there seems an unalterable contradiction between the human mind and its employments. How can a *soul* be a merchant? What relation to an immortal being have the price of linseed, the fall of butter, the tare on tallow, or the brokerage on hemp? Can an undying creature debit "petty expenses," and charge for "carriage paid"? 'All the world's a stage;" the "satchel" and the "shining morning face," the "strange oaths," the "bubble reputation," the

> "Eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
> Full of wise saws and modern instances,"†—

can these things be real? Surely they are acting. What relation have they to the truth as we see it in theory? what connection with our certain hopes, our deep desires, our craving and infinite thought?

*Anecdote at end of Vol. i. of the "Memoir."

†"As You Like It," ii. 7. So quoted as to make nonsense of it.—ED.

Digitized by Google

"In respect of itself, it is a good life; but in respect it is a shepherd's life, it is naught."* The soul ties its shoe; the mind washes its hands in a basin. All is incongruous.

Shallow. Certain, 'tis certain; very sure, very sure: death, as the Psalmist saith, is certain to all; all shall die. — How a good yoke of bullocks at Stamford fair?

Silence. Truly, cousin, I was not there.

Shallow. Death is certain. — Is old Double of your town living yet?

Silence. Dead, sir.

Shallow. Dead! See! See! A drew a good bow — and dead! A shot a fine shoot: John a Gaunt loved him well, and betted much money on his head. — Dead! a would have clapped i' the clout at twelvescore; and carried you a forehand shaft a fourteen and fourteen-and-a-half, that it would have done a man's heart good to see. — How a score of ewes now?

Silence. Thereafter as they be: a score of good ewes may be worth ten pounds.

Shallow. And is old Double dead!†

It is because Sydney Smith had so little of this Shakespearian humor that there is a glare in his pages, and that in the midst of his best writing we sigh for the soothing superiority of quieter writers.

Sydney Smith was not only the wit of the first *Edinburgh*, but likewise the divine; he was, to use his own expression, the only clergyman who in those days "turned out" to fight the battles of the Whigs. In some sort this was not so important: a curious abstinence from religious topics characterizes the original *Review;* there is a wonderful omission of this most natural topic of speculation in the lives of Horner and Jeffrey. In truth, it would seem that, living in the incessant din of a Calvinistic country, the best course for thoughtful and serious men was to be silent,—at least they instinctively thought so; they felt no involuntary call to be theological teachers themselves, and gently recoiled from the coarse

*"As You Like It," iii. 2. †"2 Henry IV.," iii. 2.

Digitized by Google

admonition around them. Even in the present milder time, few cultivated persons willingly think on the special dogmas of distinct theology. They do not deny them, but they live apart from them; they do not disbelieve them, but they are silent when they are stated. They do not question the existence of Kamtchatka, but they have no call to busy themselves with Kamtchatka: they abstain from peculiar tenets. Nor in truth is this, though much aggravated by existing facts, a mere accident of this age, — there are some people to whom such a course of conduct is always natural: there are certain persons who do not, as it would seem cannot, feel all that others feel; who have, so to say, no *ear* for much of religion, — who are in some sort out of its reach.

"It is impossible," says a late divine of the Church of England, "not to observe that innumerable persons — may we not say the majority of mankind? — who have a belief in God and immortality, have nevertheless hardly any consciousness of the peculiar doctrines of the gospel. They seem to live aloof from them in the routine of business or of pleasure, 'the common life of all men;' not without a sense of right and a rule of truth and honesty, yet insensible" to much which we need not name. "They have never in their whole lives experienced the love of God or the sense of sin or the need of forgiveness. Often they are remarkable for the purity of their morals; many of them have strong and disinterested attachments and quick human sympathies, sometimes a stoical feeling of uprightness or a peculiar sensitiveness to dishonor. It would be a mistake to say they are without religion: they join in its public acts; they are offended at profaneness or impiety; they are thankful for the blessings of life, and do not rebel against its misfortunes. Such men meet us at every turn; they are those whom we know and associate with, — honest in their dealings, respectable in their lives, decent in their conversation. The Scripture speaks to us of two classes, represented by the church and the world, the wheat and the tares, the sheep and the goats, the friends and enemies of God: we cannot say in which of these two divisions we should find a place for them."*

* "Natural Religion," in Jowett's "Epistles of St. Paul," Vol. ii., following Chap. xvi. of Romans.

Digitized by Google

They believe always a kind of "natural religion." Now, these are what we may call, in the language of the past,* Liberals. Those who can remember or who will reread our delineation of the Whig character may observe its conformity: there is the same purity and delicacy, the same tranquil sense; an equal want of imagination, of impulsive enthusiasm, of shrinking fear. You need not speak, like the above writer, of "peculiar doctrines": the phenomenon is no specialty of a particular creed. Glance over the whole of history: as the classical world stood beside the Jewish, as Horace beside St. Paul, like the heavy ark and the buoyant waves,—so are men in contrast with one another. You cannot imagine a classical Isaiah; you cannot fancy a Whig St. Dominic; there is no such thing as a Liberal Augustine. The deep sea of mysticism lies opposed to some natures: in some moods it is a sublime wonder, in others an "impious ocean,"† — they will never put forth on it at any time.

All this is intelligible, and in a manner beautiful, as a character; but it is not equally excellent as a creed. A certain class of Liberal divines have endeavored to petrify into a theory a pure and placid disposition. In some respects Sydney Smith is one of these: his sermons are the least excellent of his writings; of course they are sensible and well-intentioned, but they have the defect of his school. With misdirected energy, these divines have labored after a plain religion: they have forgotten that a quiet and definite mind is confined to a placid and definite word; that religion has its essence in awe, its charm in infinity, its sanction in dread; that its dominion is an inexplicable dominion, that mystery is its power. There is a reluctance in all such writers: they creep away from the unintelligible parts of the subject; they

* An evident misprint for "present."—ED.

† Probably an allusion to Horace's "impious vessels" on the "sundering ocean," Ode iii., lines 21-24.—ED.

Digitized by Google

always seem to have something behind,—not to like to bring out what they know to be at hand. They are in their nature apologists; and as George III. said, "I did not know the Bible needed an apology."* As well might the thunder be ashamed to roll as religion hesitate to be too awful for mankind; the invective of Lucretius is truer than the placid patronage of the divine. Let us admire Liberals in life, but let us keep no terms with Paleyans in speculation.

And so we must draw to a conclusion. We have in some sort given a description of — with one great exception — the most remarkable men connected at its origin with the *Edinburgh Review;* and that exception is a man of too fitful, defective, and strange greatness to be spoken of now. Henry Brougham must be left to after times.† Indeed, he would have marred the unity of our article, — he was connected with the Whigs, but he never was one: his impulsive ardor is the opposite of their coolness; his irregular, discursive intellect contrasts with their quiet and perfecting mind. Of those of whom we have spoken, let us say that if none of them attained to the highest rank of abstract intellect, if the disposition of none of them was ardent or glowing enough to hurry them forward to the extreme point of daring greatness, if only one can be said to have a lasting place in real literature, — it is clear that they vanquished a slavish cohort; that they upheld the name of freemen in a time of bondmen; that they applied themselves to that which was real, and accomplished much which was very difficult; that the very critics who question their inimitable excellence will yet admire their just and scarcely imitable example.

*Referring to Watson's "Apology for the Bible," in reply to Paine. It is hardly necessary to say that the Bishop was a better scholar than the King, and used the word in its original sense of "vindication." — ED.

†See Vol. iii. of this series.

Digitized by Google

*HARTLEY COLERIDGE.**

(1852.)

[All the biographical details and quotations in this essay not otherwise credited are from Rev. Derwent Coleridge's Memoir of his brother, prefixed to his edition of the latter's poems. — ED.]

HARTLEY COLERIDGE was not like the Duke of Wellington. Children are urged by the example of the great statesman and warrior just departed — not indeed to neglect "their book" as he did, but — to be industrious and thrifty; to "always perform business," to "beware of procrastination," to "NEVER fail to do their best:" good ideas, as may be ascertained by referring to the masterly dispatches on the Mahratta transactions, — "great events," as the preacher continues, "which exemplify the efficacy of diligence even in regions where the very advent of our religion is as yet but partially made known." But

> "What a wilderness were this sad world,
> If man were always man and never child!"†

And it were almost a worse wilderness if there were not some, to relieve the dull monotony of activity, who are children through life; who act on wayward impulse, and whose will has never come; who toil not and who spin not; who always have "fair Eden's simpleness"‡: and of such was Hartley Coleridge. "Don't you remember," writes Gray to Horace Walpole, "when Lord B and Sir H. C and Viscount D, who are now great statesmen, were little dirty boys playing at cricket? For my part, I do not feel one

* Hartley Coleridge's Lives of the Northern Worthies. A New Edition. 3 vols. Moxon.

† Hartley Coleridge, "Sonnet to Childhood."

‡ Ibid.

Digitized by Google

bit older or wiser now than I did then."* For as some apply their minds to what is next them, and labor ever, and attain to governing the Tower and entering the Trinity House, to commanding armies and applauding pilots, — so there are also some who are ever anxious to-day about what ought only to be considered to-morrow; who never get on; whom the earth neglects, and whom tradesmen little esteem; who are where they were; who cause grief, and are loved; that are at once a by-word and a blessing; who do not live in life, and it seems will not die in death: and of such was Hartley Coleridge.

A curious instance of poetic anticipation was in this instance vouchsafed to Wordsworth. When Hartley was six years old, he addressed to him these verses,† perhaps the best ever written on a real and visible child: —

"O thou! whose fancies from afar are brought;
Who of thy words dost make a mock apparel,
And fittest to unutterable thought
The breeze-like motion and the self-born carol;
Thou faery voyager! that dost float
In such clear water that thy boat
May rather seem
To brood on air than on an earthly stream;
. . . . . .
O blessed vision! happy child!
Thou art so exquisitely wild,
I think of thee with many fears
For what may be thy lot in future years.
. . . . . .
Oh, too industrious folly!
Oh, vain and causeless melancholy!
Nature will either end thee quite,
Or, lengthening out thy season of delight,
Preserve for thee, by individual right,
A young lamb's heart among the full-grown flocks."

* From a letter to *West* (May 27, 1742), not to Walpole; and the correct reading is this: — "There is my lords —— and ——, they are statesmen: do not you remember them dirty boys playing at cricket? As for me, I am never a bit the older nor the bigger nor the wiser than I was then." — Ed.

† "To H. C."

Digitized by Google

And so it was: as often happens, being very little of a boy in actual childhood, Hartley preserved into manhood and age all of boyhood which he had ever possessed, — its beaming imagination and its wayward will. He had none of the natural roughness of that age: he never played, partly from weakness (for he was very small) but more from awkwardness, — his uncle Southey used to say he had two left hands, and might have added that they were both useless; he could no more have achieved football or mastered cricket, or kept in with the hounds, than he could have followed Charles's Wain or played pitch and toss with Jupiter's satellites. Nor was he very excellent at school work. He showed indeed no deficiency: the Coleridge family have inherited from the old scholar of Ottery St. Mary a certain classical facility which could not desert the son of Samuel Taylor; but his real strength was in his own mind. All children have a world of their own, as distinct from that of the grown people who gravitate around them as the dreams of girlhood from our prosaic life, as the ideas of the kitten that plays with the falling leaves from those of her carnivorous mother that catches mice and is sedulous in her domestic duties. But generally, about this interior existence, children are dumb. You have warlike ideas; but you cannot say to a sinewy relative, "My dear aunt, I wonder when the big bush in the garden will begin to walk about: I'm sure it's a crusader, and I was cutting it all the day with my steel sword. But what do you think, aunt? for I'm puzzled about its legs, because you see, aunt, it has only *one* stalk; and besides, aunt, the leaves." You cannot remark this in secular life; but you hack at the infelicitous bush till you do not altogether reject the idea that your small garden is Palestine, and yourself the most adventurous of knights. Hartley had this, of course, like any other dreamy child; but in his case it was accompanied with the faculty of speech and an extraordinary

Digitized by Google

facility in continuous story-telling. In the very earliest childhood he had conceived a complete outline of a country like England, whereof he was king himself, and in which there were many wars and rumors of wars, and foreign relations, and statesmen, and rebels, and soldiers. "My people, Derwent," he used to begin, "are giving me much pain: they want to go to war."* This faculty, as was natural, showed itself before he went to school; but he carried on the habit of fanciful narration even into that bleak and ungenial region. "It was not," says his brother, "by a series of tales, but by one continuous tale, regularly evolved and possessing a real unity, that he enchained the attention of his auditors night after night, as we lay in bed, . . . for a space of years, and not unfrequently for hours together. . . . There was certainly," he adds, "a great variety of persons sharply characterized, who appeared on the stage in combination and not merely in succession." Connected, in Hartley, with this premature development of the imagination, there was a singular deficiency in what may be called the *sense* of reality: it is alleged that he hardly knew that Ejuxria, which is the name of his kingdom, was not as solid a *terra firma* as Keswick or Ambleside. The deficiency showed itself on other topics. His father used to tell a story of his metaphysical questioning. When he was about five years old he was asked, doubtless by the paternal metaphysician, some question as to why he was called Hartley. "'Which Hartley?' asked the boy.—'Why! is there more than one Hartley?'—'Yes,' he replied, there's a deal of Hartleys: . . . there's Picture Hartley' (Hazlitt had painted a portrait of him), 'and Shadow Hartley, and there's Echo Hartley, and there's Catch-me-fast-Hartley,'" seizing his own arm very eagerly, and as if reflecting on the

* Incorrectly given. From letter of Mrs. Basil Montagu in Memoir:—"He said, 'My people are too fond of war, . . . and to war they will go.'"—ED.

Digitized by Google

"summject and ommject,"* — which is to say, being in hopeless confusion. We do not hear whether he was puzzled and perplexed by such difficulties in later life: and the essays which we are reviewing, though they contain much keen remark on the detail of human character, are destitute of the Germanic profundities; they do not discuss how existence is possible, nor enumerate the pure particulars of the soul itself. But considering the idle dreaminess of his youth and manhood, we doubt if Hartley ever got over his preliminary doubts, — ever properly grasped the idea of fact and reality. This is not nonsense: if you attend acutely, you may observe that in few things do people differ more than in their perfect and imperfect realization of this earth. To the Duke of Wellington a coat was a coat, — "there was no mistake," no reason to disbelieve it; and he carried to his grave a perfect and indubitable persuasion that he really did (what was his best exploit), without fluctuation, *shave* on the morning of the battle of Waterloo, — you could not have made him doubt it. But to many people who will never be field marshals, there is on such points, not rational doubt but instinctive questioning. "Who the devil," said Lord Byron, "could *make* such a world? No one, I believe."†

"Cast your thoughts," says a very different writer,‡ "back on the time when our ancient buildings were first reared. Consider the churches all around us: how many generations have past since stone was put upon stone till the whole edifice was finished! The first movers and instruments of its erection, the minds that planned it and the limbs that wrought at it, the pious hands that contributed to it and the holy lips that consecrated it, have long, long ago been taken away; yet we benefit by their good deed. . . . Does it not seem strange that men should be able, not merely by

*Carlyle, "Life of Sterling," Chap. viii. (on Coleridge).

†Irrelevant to Bagehot's idea. Byron's words are, "I wonder how the deuse anybody could make such a world" (Journal, Feb. 18, 1814); meaning merely (as the context shows) of what use most of its *inhabitants* are. — Ed.

‡John Henry Newman, "Plain and Parochial Sermons," Vol. vi., Sermon xix., "The Gospel Palaces."

Digitized by Google

acting on others, not by a continued influence carried on through many minds in a long succession, but by one simple and direct act, to come into contact with us, and as if with their own hand to benefit us, who live centuries later?"

Or again, speaking of the lower animals:—

"Can anything be more marvelous or startling, unless we were used to it, than that we should have a race of beings about us whom we do but see, and as little know their state, or can describe their interests or their destiny, as we can tell of the inhabitants of the sun and moon? It is indeed a very overpowering thought, when we get to fix our minds on it, that we familiarly use — I may say hold intercourse with — creatures who are as much strangers to us, as mysterious, as if they were the fabulous unearthly beings, more powerful than man and yet his slaves, which Eastern superstitions have invented. . . . Cast your thoughts abroad on the whole number of them, large and small, in vast forests or in the water or in the air; and then say whether the presence of such countless multitudes, so various in their natures, so strange and wild in their shapes, . . . is not"*

as incredible as anything can be. We go into a street and see it thronged with men, and we say, Is it *true*, — *are* there these men? We look on a creeping river till we say, *Is* there this river? We enter the law courts; we watch the patient Chancellor; we hear the droning wigs; — surely this is not real; this is a dream; nobody would do *that*, — it is a delusion. We are really, as the skeptics insinuate, but "sensations and impressions," in groups or alone, that float up and down; or as the poet teaches, phantoms and images, whose idle stir but mocks the calm reality of the "pictures on the wall." All this will be called "dreamy"; but it is exactly because it *is* dreamy that we notice it. Hartley Coleridge was a dreamer: he began with Ejuxria, and throughout his years he but slumbered and slept. Life was to him a floating haze, a disputable mirage: you must not treat him like a believer in stocks and stones, — you might as well say he was a man of business.

*Same series, Vol. iv., Sermon xiii., "The Invisible World."

Digitized by Google

Hartley's school education is not worth recounting; but beside and along with it there was another education, on every side of him, singularly calculated to bring out the peculiar aptitudes of an imaginative mind, yet exactly on that very account very little likely to bring it down to fact and reality, to mix it with miry clay, or define its dreams by a daily reference to the common and necessary earth. He was bred up in the house of Mr. Southey, where, more than anywhere else in all England, it was held that literature and poetry are the aim and object of every true man, and that grocery and other affairs lie beneath at a wholly immeasurable distance, to be attended to by the inferior animals. In Hartley's case the seed fell on fitting soil: in youth, and even in childhood, he was a not unintelligent listener to the unspeakable talk of the Lake poets.

"It was so," writes his brother, "rather than by a regular course of study, that he was educated: by desultory reading, by the living voice of Coleridge, Southey, and Wordsworth, Lloyd, Wilson, and De Quincey; and again, by homely familiarity with towns-folk and country-folk of every degree; lastly, by daily recurring hours of solitude, — by lonely wanderings with the murmur of the Brathay in his ear."

Thus he lived till the time came that he should go to Oxford, and naturally enough, it seems he went up with much hope and strong excitement; for, quiet and calm as seem those ancient dormitories, to him as to many the going among them seemed the first entrance into the real world, — the end of torpidity, the beginning of life. He had often stood by the white Rydal Water and thought it was coming, and now it was come in fact. At first his Oxford life was prosperous enough. An old gentleman,* who believes that he too was once an undergraduate, well remembers how Hartley's eloquence was admired at wine parties and breakfast parties: —

* Rev. Alexander Dyce.

Digitized by Google

"Leaning his head on one shoulder, turning up his dark bright eyes, and swinging backwards and forwards in his chair, he would hold forth by the hour (for no one wished to interrupt him) on whatever subject might have been started, — either of literature, politics, or religion, — with an originality of thought, a force of illustration, and a facility and beauty of expression, which" the narrator doubts "if any man then living, except his father, could have surpassed."

The singular gift of continuous conversation — for singular it is, if in any degree agreeable — seems to have come to him by nature; and it was through life the one quality which he relied on for attraction in society. Its being agreeable is to be accounted for mainly by its singularity: if one knew any respectable number of declaimers, — if any proportion of one's acquaintance should receive the gift of the English language, and "improve each shining hour" with liquid eloquence, how we should regret their present dumb and torpid condition! If we are to be dull, — which our readers will admit to be an appointment of Providence, — surely we will be dull in silence. Do not sermons exist, and are they not a warning to mankind?

In fact, the habit of common and continuous speech is a symptom of mental deficiency: it proceeds from not knowing what is going on in other people's minds. S. T. Coleridge, it is well known, talked to everybody, and to everybody alike: like a Christian divine, he did not regard persons. "That is a fine opera, Mr. Coleridge," said a young lady, some fifty years back. — "Yes, ma'am; and I remember Kant somewhere makes a very similar remark: for as *we* know, the idea of philosophical infinity — " Now, this sort of talk will answer with two sorts of people: — With comfortable, stolid, solid people, who don't understand it at all, who don't feel that they ought to understand it, — who feel that they ought not, that *they* are to sell treacle and appreciate figs, but that there *is* this transcendental superlunary

Digitized by Google

sphere, which is known to others, which is now revealed in the spiritual speaker, the unmitigated oracle, the evidently celestial sound. That the dreamy orator himself has no more notion what is passing in their minds than they have what is running through his, is of no consequence at all. If he did know it, he would be silent: he would be jarred to feel how utterly he was misunderstood; it would break the flow of his everlasting words. Much better that he should run on in a never-pausing stream, and that the wondering rustics should admire forever; the basis of the entertainment is, that neither should comprehend the other. But in a degree yet higher is the society of an omniscient orator agreeable to a second sort of people: generally young men, and particularly — as in Hartley's case — clever undergraduates. All young men like what is theatrical; and by a fine dispensation, all clever young men like notions, — they want to hear about opinions, to know about opinions. The ever-flowing rhetorician gratifies both propensions: he is a notional *spectacle;* like the sophist of old, he *is* something and says something. The vagabond speculator in all ages will take hold on those who wish to reason, and want premises; who wish to argue, and want theses; who desire demonstrations, and have but presumptions: and so it was acceptable enough that Hartley should make the low tones of his musical voice glide sweetly and spontaneously through the cloisters of Merton, debating the old questions, the "fate, freewill, foreknowledge,"* — the points that Ockham and Scotus propounded in these same inclosures, — the common riddles, the everlasting enigmas of mankind. It attracts the scorn of middle-aged men (who depart *πρὸς τὰ ἱερά*, † and fancy they are wise); but it is a pleasant thing, — that impact of hot thought upon hot thought, of young thought upon young thought, of new thought upon

* "Paradise Lost," Book ii.

† "To the sacrifices" (*i. e.*, cling to accepted creeds).

Digitized by Google

new thought; it comes to the fortunate once, but to no one a second time thereafter forever.

Nor was Hartley undistinguished in the regular studies of the University. A regular, exact, accurate scholar he never was; but even in his early youth, he perhaps knew much more and understood much more of ancient literature than sevenscore of schoolmasters and classmen. He had probably in his mind a picture of the ancient world, or of some of it; while the dry *literati* only know the combinations and permutations of the Greek alphabet. There is a pleasant picture of him at this epoch, recorded by an eye-witness:—

"My attention," he narrates, "was at first aroused by seeing from my window a figure flitting about amongst the trees and shrubs of the garden with quick and agitated motion. This was Hartley, who, in the ardor of preparing for his college examination, did not even take his meals with the family; but snatched a hasty morsel in his own apartment, and only . . . sought the free air when the fading daylight no longer permitted him to see his books. Having found out who he was that so mysteriously flitted about the garden, I was determined to lose no time in making his acquaintance; and through the instrumentality of Mrs. Coleridge I paid Hartley a visit to what he called his 'den.' This was a room afterwards converted by Mr. Southey" — as what chink was not? — "into a supplementary library, but then appropriated as a study to Hartley, and presenting a most picturesque and student-like disorder of scattered pamphlets and open folios."

This is not a picture of the business-like reading man, — one wonders what fraction of his time he did read, — but it was probably the happiest period of his life. There was no coarse prosaic action there: much musing, little studying; fair scholarship, an atmosphere of the classics, curious fancies, much perusing of pamphlets, light thoughts on heavy folios,— these make the meditative poet, but not the technical and patient-headed scholar: yet after all he was happy, and obtained a second class.

A more suitable exercise, as it would have seemed at first sight, was supplied by that curious portion

Digitized by Google

of Oxford routine, the Annual Prize Poem. This, he himself tells us, was in his academic years the real and single object of his ambition. His reason is, for an autobiographical reason, decidedly simple. "A great poet," he says, "I should not have imagined myself, for I knew well enough that the verses were no great things:" but he entertained at that period of life — he was twenty-one — a favorable opinion of young ladies; and he seems to have ascertained, possibly from actual trial, that verses were not in themselves a very emphatic attraction. Singular as it may sound, the ladies selected were not only insensible to what is after all a metaphysical line, the distinction between good poetry and bad, but were almost indifferent to poetry itself. Yet the experiment was not quite conclusive: verses might fail in common life and yet succeed in the Sheldonian theater. It is plain that they would be *read out:* it occurred to him, as he naïvely relates, that if he should appear "as a prizeman," "as a reciter of intelligible poetry," he would be an object of "some curiosity to the fair promenaders in Christ Church Meadow"; that the young ladies "with whom" he "was on bowing and speaking terms might have felt a satisfaction in being known to know me which they had never experienced before." "I should," he adds, "have deemed myself a prodigious lion, and it was a character I was weak enough to covet more than that of poet, scholar, or philosopher."

In fact, he did not get the prize. The worthy East-Indian* who imagined that in leaving a bequest for a prize to poetry, he should be as sure of possessing poetry for his money as of eggs if he had chosen eggs, or of butter if he had chosen butter, did not estimate rightly the nature of poetry or the nature of the human mind. The mechanical parts of rhythm

* A curious error: Sir Roger Newdigate (1719–1806) was a Warwickshire country gentleman, long M. P. for Oxford, and had nothing to do with India. See Burke's "Landed Gentry," a blundering note in "Beauties of England and Wales," under Arbury in Warwickshire, and a correct one in Wright's edition of Horace Walpole's Letters, repeated in Cunningham's, i. 194–5. — Ed.

Digitized by Google

and metre are all that a writer can be certain of producing, or that a purchaser can be sure of obtaining; and these an industrious person will find in any collection of the Newdigate poems, together with a fine assortment of similes and sentiments respectively invented and enjoined by Shem and Japhet for and to the use of after generations. And there is a peculiar reason why a great poet (besides his being, as a man of genius, rather more likely than another to find a difficulty in the preliminary technicalities of art) should not obtain an academical prize, to be given for excellent verses to people of about twenty-one: it is a bad season. "The imagination" (said a great poet of the very age) "of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life between, in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undecided, the way of life uncertain, the ambition thick-sighted."* And particularly in a real poet, where the disturbing influences of passion and fancy are most likely to be in excess, will this unhealthy tinge be most likely to be excessive and conspicuous. Nothing in the style of "Endymion" would have a chance of a prize: there are no complete conceptions, no continuance of adequate words; what is worse, there are no defined thoughts or aged illustrations. The characteristic of the whole is beauty and novelty; but it is beauty which is not formed, and novelty which is strange and wavering. Some of these defects are observable in the copy of verses on the "Horses of Lysippus," which Hartley Coleridge contributed to the list of unsuccessful attempts. It does not contain so much originality as we might have expected, — on such a topic we anticipated more nonsense; a little we are glad to say there is, and also that there is an utter want of those even raps which are the music of prize poems, — which were the right rhythm for Pope's elaborate sense, but are quite unfit for dreamy classics or contemplative enthusiasm. If Hartley, like Pope,

* Keats in the preface to "Endymion."

Digitized by Google

had been the son of a shopkeeper, he would not have received the paternal encouragement, but rather a reprimand, — "Boy, boy, these be bad rhymes;" and so too believed a grizzled and cold examiner.

A much worse failure was at hand. He had been elected to a fellowship in what was at that time the only open foundation in Oxford, — Oriel College: an event which shows more exact scholarship in Hartley, or more toleration in the academical authorities for the grammatical delinquencies of a superior man, than we should have been inclined, *a priori*, to attribute to either of them. But it soon became clear that Hartley was not exactly suited to that place. Decorum is the essence, pomposity the advantage, of tutors: these Hartley had not. Beside the serious defects which we shall mention immediately, he was essentially an absent and musing, and therefore at times a highly indecorous man; and though not defective in certain kinds of vanity, there was no tinge in his manner of scholastic dignity. A schoolmaster should have an atmosphere of awe, and walk wonderingly, as if he was amazed at being himself; but an excessive sense of the ludicrous disabled Hartley altogether from the acquisition of this valuable habit, — perhaps he never really attempted to obtain it. He accordingly never became popular as a tutor, nor was he ever described as "exercising an influence over young persons." Moreover, however excellently suited Hartley's eloquence might be to the society of undergraduates, it was out of place at the fellows' table: this is said to be a dull place. The excitement of early thought has passed away, the excitements of active manhood are unknown; a certain torpidity seems natural there. We find too that — probably for something to say — he was in those years rather fond of exaggerated denunciation of the powers that be: this is not the habit most grateful to the heads of houses. "Sir," said a great authority, "do you deny that Lord Derby ought to

Digitized by Google

be Prime Minister? you might as well say that I ought not to be Warden of So-and-So."* These habits rendered poor Hartley no favorite with the leading people of his college; and no great prospective shrewdness was required to predict that he would fare but ill, if any sufficient occasion should be found for removing from the place a person so excitable and so little likely to be of use in inculcating "safe" opinions among the surrounding youth.

Unhappily, the visible morals of Hartley offered an easy occasion. It is not quite easy to gather from the narrative of his brother the exact nature or full extent of his moral delinquencies; but enough is shown to warrant, according to the rules, the unfavorable judgment of the collegiate authorities. He describes, probably truly, the commencement of his errors:—

"I verily believe that I should have gone crazy, silly-mad, with vanity, had I obtained the prize for my 'Horses of Lysippus.' It was almost the only occasion in my life wherein I was keenly disappointed; for it was the only one upon which I felt any confident hope. I had made myself very sure of it, and the intelligence that not I but Macdonald was the lucky man absolutely stupefied me; yet I contrived for a time to lose all sense of my own misfortune, in exultation for Burton's success. . . . I sang, I danced, I whistled, I leapt, I ran from room to room, announcing the great tidings, and tried to persuade even myself that I cared nothing at all for my own case. But it would not do: it was bare sands with me the next day. It was not the mere loss of the prize, but the feeling or phantasy of an adverse destiny. . . . I foresaw that all my aims and hopes would prove frustrate and abortive; and from that time I date my downward declension, my impotence of will and melancholy recklessness. It was the first time I sought relief from wine, which, as usual in such cases, produced not so much intoxication as downright madness."

Cast in an uncongenial society, requiring to live in an atmosphere of respect and affection and surrounded by gravity and distrust, misconstrued and

*The original *Review* article has "Dr. Marsham" and "Warden of Merton" for the generalities in the reprint.—Ed.

Digitized by Google

half tempted to maintain the misconstruction; with the waywardness of childhood without the innocency of its impulses, with the passions of manhood without the repressive vigor of a man's will,—he lived as a woman lives that is lost and forsaken, who sins ever and hates herself for sinning, but who sins perhaps more on that very account: because she requires some relief from the keenness of her own reproach; because in her morbid fancy the idea is ever before her; because her petty will is unable to cope with the daily craving and the horrid thought,—that she may not lose her own identity, that she may not give in to the rigid, the distrustful, and the calm.

There is just this excuse for Hartley, whatever it may be worth, that the weakness was hereditary. We do not as yet know—it seems most likely that we shall never know—the precise character of his father; but with all the discrepancy concerning the details, enough for our purpose is certain of the outline. We know that he lived many and long years a prey to weaknesses and vice of this very description; and though it be false and mischievous to speak of hereditary vice, it is most true and wise to observe the mysterious fact of hereditary temptation. Doubtless it is strange that the nobler emotions and the inferior impulses, their peculiar direction or their proportionate strength, the power of a fixed idea,—that the inner energy of the very will, which seems to issue from the inmost core of our complex nature, and to typify, if anything does, the pure essence of the immortal soul,—that these and such as these should be transmitted by material descent, as though they were an accident of the body, the turn of an eyebrow or the feebleness of a joint. If this were not obvious, it would be as amazing [as]—perhaps more amazing than—any fact which we know; it looks not only like predestinated, but even heritable election. But, explicable or inexplicable, to be wondered at or not wondered at, the fact is clear·

Digitized by Google

tendencies and temptations are transmitted even to the fourth generation, both for good and for evil, both in those who serve God and in those who serve him not. Indeed, the weakness before us seems essentially connected — perhaps we may say on a final examination essentially identical — with the dreaminess of mind, the inapprehensiveness of reality, which we remarked upon before. Wordsworth used to say that at a particular stage of his mental progress he used to be frequently so rapt into an unreal transcendental world of ideas that the external world seemed no longer to exist in relation to him, and he had to convince himself of its existence by *clasping a tree* or something that happened to be near him.* But suppose a mind which did not feel acutely the sense of reality which others feel, in hard contact with the tangible universe; which was blind to the distinction between the palpable and the impalpable, or rather lived in the latter in preference to, and nearly to the exclusion of, the former, — what is to fix such a mind? what is to strengthen it, to give it a fulcrum? To exert itself, the will, like the arm, requires to have an obvious and a definite resistance; to know where it is, why it is, whence it comes and whither it goes. "We are such stuff as dreams are made on,"† says Prospero. So too the difficulty of Shakespeare's greatest dreamer, Hamlet, is, that he cannot quite believe that his duty is to be done where it lies, and immediately; partly from the natural effect of a vision of a spirit which is not, but more from native constitution and instinctive bent, he is forever speculating on the reality of existence, the truth of the world. "How," discusses Kant, "is

* Note to ode on the "Intimations of Immortality": — "I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence; and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped at a wall or tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality."

† "The Tempest," iv. 1.

Digitized by Google

nature in general possible?"* and so asked Hamlet too. With this feeling on his mind, persuasion is useless and argument in vain. Examples gross as earth exhort him, but they produce no effect; but he thinks and thinks the more.

> "Now, whether it be
> Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
> Of thinking too precisely on the event, —
> A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom
> And ever three parts coward, — I do not know
> Why yet I live to say, 'This thing's to do,'
> Sith I have cause and will and strength and means
> To do't."†

Hartley himself well observes that on such a character the likelihood of action is inversely as the force of the motive and the time for deliberation.‡ The stronger the reason, the more certain the skepticism: *can* anything be so certain? does not the excess of the evidence alleged make it clear that there is something behind, something on the other side? search then diligently lest anything be overlooked. Reflection "puzzles the will,"§ necessity "benumbs like a torpedo;"‖ and so

> "The native hue of resolution
> Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought;
> And enterprises of great pith and moment
> With this regard their currents turn awry,
> And lose the name of action."¶

Why should we say any more? We do but "chant snatches of old tunes."** But in estimating men like the Coleridges, — the son even more than the father, — we must take into account this peculiar difficulty, this dreamy unbelief, this daily skepticism, this haunting unreality, and imagine that some may

* "Prolegomena to Metaphysic," 37, 38.
† "Hamlet," iv. 5.
‡ Essay "On the Character of Hamlet."
§ "To be or not to be."
‖ Derwent Coleridge on Hartley.
¶ "Hamlet," iii. 1.
** "Thy snatches of old lays." — "Virginia," in Macaulay's "Lays of Ancient Rome."

Digitized by Google

not be quite responsible either for what they do or for what they do not; because they are bewildered and deluded and perplexed, and want the faculty as much to comprehend their difficulty as to subdue it.

The Oxford life of Hartley is all his life; the failure of his prospects there, in his brother's words, "deprived him of the residue of his years." The biography afterwards goes to and fro, — one attempt after another failing; some beginning in much hope, but even the sooner for that reason issuing in utter despair. His literary powers came early to full perfection. For some time after his expulsion from Oriel he was resident in London; and the poems written there are equal, perhaps are superior, to any which he afterwards produced. This sonnet may serve as a specimen: —

"In the great city we are met again,
Where many souls there are that breathe and die
Scarce knowing more of nature's potency
Than what they learn from heat or cold or rain,
The sad vicissitude of weary pain;
For busy man is lord of ear and eye,
And what hath nature but the vast void sky
And the thronged river toiling to the main?
Oh! say not so, for she shall have her part
In every smile, in every tear that falls,
And she shall hide her in the secret heart,
Where love persuades and sterner duty calls;
But worse it were than death or sorrow's smart,
To live without a friend within these walls."

He soon, however, went down to the lakes; and there, except during one or two short intervals, he lived and died. This exception was a residence at Leeds, during which he brought out, besides a volume containing his best poems, the book which stands at the head of our article, — the "Lives of the Northern Worthies." We selected the book, we confess, with the view mainly of bringing a remarkable character before the notice of our readers; but

Digitized by Google

in itself the work is an excellent one, and of a rare kind.

Books are for various purposes: tracts to teach, almanacs to sell, poetry to make pastry; but this is the rarest sort of book, a book to *read*. As Dr. Johnson said, "Sir, a good book is one you can hold in your hand and take to the fire."* Now, there are extremely few books which can with any propriety be so treated. When a great author, as Grote or Gibbon, has devoted a whole life of horrid industry to the composition of a large history, one feels one ought not to touch it with a mere hand, — it is not respectful. The idea of slavery hovers over the "Decline and Fall": fancy a stiffly dressed gentleman, in a stiff chair, slowly writing that stiff compilation in a stiff hand: it is enough to stiffen you for life. Or is poetry readable? Of course it is remembrable: when you have it in mind it clings, if by heart it haunts; imagery comes from it, songs which lull the ear, heroines that waste the time. But this "Biographia"† is actually read; a man is glad to take it up, and slow to lay it down: it is a book which is truly valuable, for it is truly pleasing; and which a man who has once had it in his library would miss from his shelves, not only in the common way by a physical vacuum, but by a mental deprivation. This strange quality it owes to a peculiarity of style. Many people give many theories of literary composition, and Dr. Blair (whom we will read) is sometimes said to have exhausted the subject; but unless he has proved to the contrary, we believe that the knack in style is to write like a human being. Some think they must be wise, some elaborate, some concise; Tacitus wrote like a pair of stays; some startle, as Thomas Carlyle, or a comet inscribing

* "Books that you may carry to the fire, and hold readily in your hand, are the most useful after all." — Sir John Hawkins's "Life of Johnson"; quoted in "Johnsoniana," No. 197.

† "Biographia Borealis."

Digitized by Google

with his tail: but legibility is given to those who neglect these notions, and are willing to be themselves, — to write their own thoughts in their own words, in the simplest words, in the words wherein they were thought; and such and so great was in this book the magnanimity of Hartley.

As has been said, from his youth onwards Hartley's outward life was a simple blank. Much writing and much musing, some intercourse with Wordsworth, some talking to undergraduate readers or lake ladies, great loneliness, and much intercourse with the farmers of Cumberland: these pleasures — simple enough, most of them — were his life. The extreme pleasure of the peasantry in his conversation is particularly remarked. "Aye, but Mr. Coleridge talks fine," observed one. "I would go through fire and water for Mr. Coleridge," interjected another. His father, with real wisdom, had provided (in part, at least) for his necessary wants in the following manner: —

"This is a codicil to my last will and testament.

"S. T. COLERIDGE.

"Most desirous to secure, as far as in me lies, for my dear son Hartley, the tranquillity indispensable to any continued and successful exertion of his literary talents, and which, from the like characters of our minds in this respect, I know to be especially requisite for his happiness, and persuaded that he will recognize in this provision that anxious affection by which it is dictated, I affix this codicil to my last will and testament. . . . And I hereby request them (the said trustees) to hold the sum accruing to Hartley Coleridge from the equal division of my total bequest between him, his brother Derwent, and his sister Sara Coleridge, after his mother's decease, to dispose of the interest or proceeds of the same portion to or for the use of my dear son Hartley Coleridge, at such time or times, in such manner, and under such conditions, as they, the trustees above named, know to be my wish, and shall deem conducive to the attainment of my object in adding this codicil; namely, the anxious wish to insure for my son the continued means of a home, — in which I comprise board, lodging, and raiment. Providing that nothing in this codicil shall be so interpreted as to interfere with my son Hartley Coleridge's freedom

Digitized by Google

of choice respecting his place of residence, or with his power of disposing of his portion by will after his decease according as his own judgment and affections may decide." [July 2, 1835.]

An excellent provision, which would not, however, by the English law, have disabled the "said Hartley" from depriving himself of "the continued means of a home" by alienating the principal of the bequest; since the jurisprudence of this country has no legal definition of "prodigality," and does not consider any person incompetent to manage his pecuniary affairs unless he be quite and certainly insane. Yet there undoubtedly are persons — and poor Hartley was one of them — who, though in general perfectly sane, and even with superior powers of thought or fancy, are as completely unable as the most helpless lunatic to manage any pecuniary transactions, and to whom it would be a great gain to have perpetual guardians and compulsory trustees; but such people are rare, and few principles are so English as the maxim *De minimis non curat lex.* *

He lived in this way for thirty years, or nearly so; but there is nothing to tell of all that time. He died Jan. 6, 1849, and was buried in Grasmere churchyard, the quietest place in England; "under the yews," as Arnold says, "which Wordsworth planted, . . . the Rotha with its deep and silent pools passing by." † It was a shining January day when Hartley was borne to the grave. "Keep the ground for us," said Mr. Wordsworth to the sexton: "we are old people, and it cannot be for long."

We have described Hartley's life at length for a peculiar reason. It is necessary to comprehend his character to appreciate his works; and there is no way of delineating character but by a selection of characteristic sayings and actions. All poets, as is commonly observed, are delineated in their poems;

* "The law does not care for trifles."

† Dr. Arnold's Life of Dean Stanley, close of Chap. iv.

Digitized by Google

but in very different modes. Each minute event in the melancholy life of Shelley is frequently alluded to in his writings; the tender and reverential character of Virgil is everywhere conspicuous in his pages; it is clear that Chaucer was shrewd; we seem to have talked with Shakespeare, though we have forgotten the facts of his life: but it is not by minute allusion or a tacit influence or a genial and delightful sympathy that a writer like Hartley Coleridge leaves the impress of himself, but in a more direct manner, which it will take a few words to describe.

Poetry begins in Impersonality. Homer is a voice, —a fine voice,—a fine eye, and a brain that drew with light; and this is all we know. The natural subjects of the first art are the scenes and events in which the first men naturally take an interest. They don't care—who does?—for a kind old man: but they want to hear of the exploits of their ancestors, of the heroes of their childhood, of them that their fathers saw, of the founders of their own land; of wars and rumors of wars, of great victories boldly won, of heavy defeats firmly borne, of desperate disasters unsparingly retrieved. So in all countries: Siegfried or Charlemagne or Arthur,—they are but attempts at an Achilles; the subject is the same, the *κλέα ἀνδρῶν** and the death that comes to all. But then the mist of battles passes away, and the sound of the daily conflict no longer hurtles in the air, and a generation arises skilled with the skill of peace and refined with the refinement of civilization, yet still remembering the old world, still appreciating the old life, still wondering at the old men, and ready to receive at the hand of the poet a new telling of the old tale, a new idealization of the legendary tradition. This is the age of dramatic art, when men wonder at the big characters of old, as schoolboys at the words of Æschylus, and try to find in their own breasts the roots of those monstrous but artistically developed

* "Glories of men."—"Iliad," ix. 189, 524; "Odyssey," viii. 73.

Digitized by Google

impersonations. With civilization too comes another change: men wish not only to tell what they have seen, but also to express what they are conscious of. Barbarians feel only hunger, and that is not lyrical; but as time runs on, arise gentler emotions and finer moods and more delicate desires, which need expression, and require from the artist's fancy the lightest touches and the most soothing and insinuating words. Lyrical poetry, too, as we know, is of various kinds. Some, as the war song, approach to the epic, depict events and stimulate to triumph; others are love songs to pour out wisdom, others sober to describe champagne; some passive and still, and expressive of the higher melancholy, as Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard." But with whatever differences of species and class, the essence of lyrical poetry remains in all identical: it is designed to express, and when successful does express, some one mood, some single sentiment, some isolated longing in human nature. It deals not with man as a whole, but with man piecemeal, with man in a scenic aspect, with man in a peculiar light. Hence lyrical poets must not be judged literally from their lyrics: they are discourses; they require to be reduced into the scale of ordinary life, to be stripped of the enraptured element, to be clogged with gravitating prose. Again, moreover, and in course of time, the advance of ages and the progress of civilization appear to produce a new species of poetry, which is distinct from the lyrical though it grows out of it, and contrasted with the epic though in a single respect it exactly resembles it. This kind may be called the *self-delineative;* for in it the poet deals not with a particular desire, sentiment, or inclination in his own mind, not with a special phase of his own character, not with his love of war, his love of ladies, his melancholy, but with his mind viewed as a whole, with the entire essence of his own character. The first requisite of this poetry is truth. It is, in Plato's phrase, the soul

Digitized by Google

"itself by itself," aspiring to view and take account of the particular notes and marks that distinguish it from all other souls. The sense of reality is necessary to excellence: the poet, being himself, speaks like one who has authority; he knows and must not deceive. This species of poetry, of course, adjoins on the lyrical, out of which it historically arises. Such a poem as the "Elegy" is, as it were, on the borders of the two; for while it expresses but a single emotion, — meditative melancholy, — you seem to feel that this sentiment is not only then and for a moment the uppermost, but (as with Gray it was) the habitual mood, the pervading emotion of his whole life. Moreover, in one especial peculiarity this sort of poetry is analogous to the narrative or epic. Nothing, certainly, can in a general aspect be more distantly removed one from another, — the one dealing in external objects and stirring events, the other with the stillness and repose of the poet's mind; but still, in a single characteristic the two coincide, — they describe character, as the painters say, *in mass*. The defect of the drama is, that it can delineate only motion: if a thoughtful person will compare the character of Achilles, as we find it in Homer, with the more surpassing creations of dramatic invention, say with Lear or Othello, he will perhaps feel that character in repose, character on the lonely beach, character in marble, character in itself, is more clearly and perfectly seen in the epic narrative than in the conversational drama; it of course requires immense skill to make mere talk exhibit a man as he is ἑτάρων ἀφαρ.* Now, this quality of epic poetry the self-delineative precisely shares with it: it describes a character — the poet's — alone by itself. And therefore, when the great master in both kinds did not hesitate to turn aside from his "high argument" to say, —

> "More safe I sing with mortal voice, unchanged
> To hoarse or mute, though fallen on evil days,"†

* Meaningless; perhaps a slip for ἑτάρων ἄτερ (apart from companions).—ED.

† "Paradise Lost," Book vii., opening apostrophe.

Digitized by Google

pedants may prose as they please about the "impropriety" of "interspersing" species of composition which are by nature remote: but Milton felt, more profoundly, that in its treatment of character the egotistical poetry is allied to the epic; that he was putting together elements which would harmoniously combine; that he was but exerting the same faculties in either case,—being guided thereto by a sure instinct, the desire of genius to handle and combine every one of the subjects on which it is genius.

Now, it is in this self-delineative species of poetry that, in our judgment, Hartley Coleridge has attained to nearly if not quite the highest excellence. It pervades his writings everywhere; but a few sonnets may be quoted to exemplify it:—

"We parted on the mountains, as two streams
From one clear spring pursue their several ways;
And thy fleet course hath been through many a maze
In foreign lands, where silvery Padus gleams
To that delicious sky whose glowing beams
Brightened the tresses that old poets praise;
Where Petrarch's patient love and artful lays,
And Ariosto's song of many themes,
Moved the soft air. But I, a lazy brook,
As close pent up within my native dell,
Have crept along from nook to shady nook,
Where flow'rets blow and whispering naiads dwell.
Yet now we meet that parted were so wide,
O'er rough and smooth to travel side by side.

"Once I was young, and fancy was my all,—
My love, my joy, my grief, my hope, my fear,
And ever ready as an infant's tear;
Whate'er in fancy's kingdom might befall,
Some quaint device had fancy still at call,
With seemly verse to greet the coming cheer.
Such grief to soothe, such airy hope to rear,
To sing the birth-song or the funeral
Of such light love, it was a pleasant task:
But ill accord the quirks of wayward glee,
That wears affliction for a wanton mask,
With woes that bear not fancy's livery;

Digitized by Google

With hope that scorns of fate its fate to ask,
But is itself its own sure destiny.

"Too true it is, my time of power was spent
In idly watering weeds of casual growth;
That wasted energy to desperate sloth
Declined, and fond self-seeking discontent;
That the huge debt for all that nature lent
I sought to cancel, and was nothing loth
To deem myself an outlaw, severed both
From duty and from hope, — yea, blindly sent
Without an errand, where I would to stray:
Too true it is, that, knowing now my state,
I weakly mourn the sin I ought to hate,
Nor love the law I yet would fain obey:
But true it is, above all law and fate
Is faith, abiding the appointed day.

"Long time a child, and still a child when years
Had painted manhood on my cheek, was I, —
For yet I lived like one not born to die;
A thriftless prodigal of smiles and tears,
No hope I needed, and I knew no fears.
But sleep, though sweet, is only sleep, and waking,
I waked to sleep no more, at once o'ertaking
The vanguard of my age, with all arrears
Of duty on my back. Nor child nor man
Nor youth nor sage, I find my head is gray,
For I have lost the race I never ran;
A rathe December blights my lagging May;
And still I am a child, though I be old:
Time is my debtor for my years untold."

Indeed, the whole series of sonnets with which the earliest and best work of Hartley began is (with a casual episode on others) mainly and essentially a series on himself. Perhaps there is something in the structure of the sonnet rather adapted to this species of composition: it is too short for narrative, too artificial for the intense passions, too complex for the simple, too elaborate for the domestic; but in an impatient world where there is not a premium on self-describing, whoso would speak of himself must be

Digitized by Google

wise and brief, artful and composed, — and in these respects he will be aided by the concise dignity of the tranquil sonnet.

It is remarkable that in this too, Hartley Coleridge resembled his father. Turn over the early poems of S. T. Coleridge, — the minor poems: we exclude the "Mariner" and "Christabel," which are his epics, but the small shreds which Bristol worshiped and Cottle paid for, — and you will be disheartened by utter dullness. Taken on a decent average, and perhaps excluding a verse here and there, it really seems to us that they are inferior to the daily works of the undeserving and multiplied poets. If any reader will peruse any six of the several works entitled "Poems by a Young Gentleman," we believe he will find the refined anonymity less insipid than the small productions of Samuel Taylor, — there will be less puff and less ostentation. The reputation of the latter was caused not by their merit but by their time. Fifty years ago people believed in metre, and it is plain that Coleridge (Southey may be added, for that matter) believed in it also: the people in Bristol said that these two were wonderful men, because they had written wonderfully small verses; and such is human vanity, that both for a time accepted the creed. In Coleridge, who had large speculative sense, the hallucination was not permanent, — there are many traces that he rated his "Juvenilia" at their value; but poor Southey, who lived with domestic women, actually died in the delusion that his early works were perfect, except that he tried to "amend" the energy out of "Joan of Arc," which was the only good thing in it. His wife did not doubt that he had produced stupendous works: why then should he? But experience has now shown that a certain metrical facility, and a pleasure in the metrical expression of certain sentiments, are in youth extremely common. Many years ago, Mr. Moore is reported to have remarked to Sir Walter Scott that

Digitized by Google

hardly a magazine was then published which did not contain verses that would have made a sensation when they were young men: "Ecod," was the reply, "we were in the luck of it to come before these fellows."* And though neither Moore nor Scott is to be confounded with the nameless and industrious versifiers of the present day, yet it must be allowed that they owed to their time and their position — to the small quantity of rhyme in the market of the moment, and the extravagant appreciation of their early productions — much of that popular encouragement which induced them to labor upon more excellent compositions, and to train themselves to write what they will be remembered by. But, dismissing these considerations and returning to the minor poems of S. T. Coleridge: although we fearlessly assert that it is impossible for any sane man to set any value on — say the "Religious Musings," an absurd attempt to versify an abstract theory, or the essay on the Pixies, who had more fun in them than the reader of it could suspect, — it still is indisputable that scattered here and there through these poems there are lines about himself (lines, as he said in later life, "in which the subjective object views itself subjectivo-objectively"†) which rank high in that form of art. Of this kind are the "Tombless Epitaph," for example, or the lines —

> "To me hath Heaven with bounteous hand assigned
> Energic Reason and a shaping mind,
> The daring ken of Truth, the Patriot's part,
> And Pity's sigh that breathes the gentle heart, —
> Sloth-jaundiced all! and from my graspless hand
> Drop Friendship's priceless pearls, like hour-glass sand.
> I weep, yet stoop not! The faint anguish flows,
> A dreamy pang in morning's feverish doze;"‡

and so on. In fact, it would appear that the tendency to and the faculty for self-delineation are very

* Lockhart, Vol. vi., Chap. iii.

† I suspect some of Bagehot's Coleridgiana came verbally from Crabb Robinson. — Ed.

‡ "Lines on a Friend," November, 1794.

Digitized by Google

closely connected with the dreaminess of disposition and impotence of character which we spoke of just now. Persons very subject to these can grasp no external object, comprehend no external being; they can do no external thing: and therefore they are left to themselves. Their own character is the only one which they can view as a whole, or depict as a reality: of every other they may have glimpses, and acute glimpses, like the vivid truthfulness of particular dreams; but no settled appreciation, no connected development, no regular sequence whereby they may be exhibited on paper or conceived in the imagination. If other qualities are supposed to be identical, those will be most egotistical who only know themselves; the people who talk most of themselves will be those who talk best.

In the execution of minor verses, we think we could show that Hartley should have the praise of surpassing his father; but nevertheless it would be absurd, on a general view, to compare the two men, Samuel Taylor was so much bigger. What there was in his son was equally good, perhaps, but then there was not much of it; outwardly and inwardly he was essentially little. In poetry, for example, the father has produced two longish poems which have worked themselves right down to the extreme depths of the popular memory, and stay there very firmly; in part from their strangeness, but in part from their power. Of Hartley, nothing of this kind is to be found. He could not write connectedly: he wanted steadiness of purpose or efficiency of will to write so voluntarily; and his genius did not, involuntarily and out of its unseen workings, present him with continuous creations, — on the contrary, his mind teemed with little fancies, and a new one came before the first had attained any enormous magnitude. As his brother observed, he wanted "back thought." "On what principle, Mr. Coleridge, are you arranging your books?" inquired a lady. "Principle, madam!

Digitized by Google

principle! I had a *plan* in my head; but I have just abandoned it, and not yet concocted another." The same contrast between the "shaping mind" of the father and the gentle and minute genius of the son is said to have been very plain in their conversation. That of Samuel was continuous, diffused, comprehensive:

"Strongly it bears us along in swelling and limitless motion,
Nothing before and nothing behind but the sky and the ocean."*

"Excellent talker, very," said Hazlitt, "*if* you will let him start from no premises and come to no conclusion."† The talk of Hartley, on the contrary, though continuous in time, was detached in meaning: stating hints and observations on particular subjects; glancing lightly from side to side, but throwing no intense light on any, and exhausting none. It flowed gently over small doubts and pleasant difficulties, rippling for a minute sometimes into bombast, but lightly recovering and falling quietly "in melody back."‡

By way, it is likely, of compensation to Hartley for this great deficiency in what his father imagined to be his own *forte*, — the power of conceiving a whole, — Hartley possessed in a considerable degree a species of sensibility to which the former was nearly a stranger. "The mind of S. T. Coleridge," says one who had every means of knowing and observing, "was not in the least under the influence of external objects."§ Except in the writings written during daily and confidential intimacy with Wordsworth (an exception that may be obviously accounted for), no trace can perhaps be found of any new image or metaphor from natural scenery; there is some story, too, of his going for the first time to York, and by

* Coleridge's translation of Schiller's sample of the epic hexameter, — except "billows" for "motion."

† Carlyle's "Life of Sterling," Chap. viii.

‡ "In the pentameter aye falling in melody back;" — Coleridge's translation of Schiller's sample of the classic pentameter.

§ (?) Not found.

Digitized by Google

the minster, and never looking up at it.* But Hartley's poems exhibit a great sensibility to a certain aspect of exterior nature, and great fanciful power of presenting that aspect in the most charming and attractive forms. It is likely that the London boyhood of the elder Coleridge was — added to a strong abstractedness which was born with him — a powerful cause in bringing about the curious mental fact that a great poet, so susceptible to every other species of refining and delightful feeling, should have been utterly destitute of any perception of beauty in landscape or nature; we must not forget that S. T. Coleridge was a blue-coat boy, — what do any of them know about fields? and similarly, we require in Hartley's case, before we can quite estimate his appreciation of nature, to consider his position, his circumstances, and especially his time.

Now it came to pass in those days that William Wordsworth went up into the hills. It has been attempted in recent years to establish that the object of his life was to teach Anglicanism; a whole life of him has been written by an official gentleman, with the apparent view of establishing that the great poet was a believer in rood-lofts, an idolater of piscinæ: but this is not capable of rational demonstration. Wordsworth, like Coleridge, began life as a heretic; and as the shrewd pope unfallaciously said, "Once a heretic, always a heretic." Sound men are sound from the first, safe men are safe from the beginning; and Wordsworth began wrong. His real reason for going to live in the mountains was certainly in part sacred, but it was not in the least Tractarian;

> "For he with many feelings, many thoughts,
> Made up a meditative joy, and found
> Religious meanings in the forms of nature." †

His whole soul was absorbed in the one idea, the one feeling, the one thought, of the sacredness of hills.

* Cottle's "Reminiscences," page 233.

† Coleridge, "Fears in Solitude" (1798); "And" in place of "For."

Digitized by Google

"Early had he learned
To reverence the volume that displays
The mystery, the life which cannot die;
But in the mountains did he *feel* his faith.
All things, responsive to the writing, there
Breathed immortality, revolving life,
And greatness still revolving, — infinite;
There littleness was not.
. . . . . .

"In the after-day
Of boyhood, many an hour in caves forlorn,
And 'mid the hollow depths of naked crags,
He sate; and even in their fixed lineaments,
Or from the power of a peculiar eye,
Or by creative feeling overborne,
Or by predominance of thought oppressed,
Even in their fixed and steady lineaments
He traced an ebbing and a flowing mind,
Expression ever varying!"*

"A sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things."†

The defect of this religion is, that it is too abstract for the practical and too bare for the musing. The worship of sensuous beauty — the Southern religion — is of all sentiments the one most deficient in his writings. His poetry hardly even gives the charm, the entire charm, of the scenery in which he lived: the lighter parts are little noticed, the rugged parts protrude; the bare waste, the folding hill, the rough lake, Helvellyn with a brooding mist, Ulswater in a gray day, — these are his subjects; he took a personal interest in the corners of the universe. There is a print of Rembrandt said to represent a piece of

* "Excursion," Book I. † "Tintern Abbey."

Digitized by Google

the Campagna,—a mere waste, with a stump and a man,—and under is written, "Tacet et loquitur;"* and thousands will pass the old print-shop where it hangs, and yet have a taste for paintings and colors and oils: but some fanciful students, some lonely stragglers, some long-haired enthusiasts, by chance will come, one by one, and look, and look, and be hardly able to take their eyes from the fascination, so massive is the shade, so still the conception, so firm the execution. Thus is it with Wordsworth and his poetry: *tacet et loquitur*. Fashion apart, the million won't read it. Why should they? they could not understand it. Don't put them out,—let them buy and sell and die;—but idle students and enthusiastic wanderers and solitary thinkers will read, and read, and read, while their lives and their occupations hold. In truth, his works are the Scriptures of the intellectual life; for that same searching and finding and penetrating power which the real Scripture exercises on those engaged, as are the mass of men, in practical occupations and domestic ties, do his works exercise on the meditative, the solitary, and the young.†

> "His daily teachers had been woods and rills,
> The silence that is in the starry sky,
> The sleep that is among the lonely hills."‡

And he had more than others

> "That blessed mood
> In which the burthen of the mystery,
> In which the heavy and the weary weight
> Of all this unintelligible world
> Is lightened: that serene and blessed mood
> In which the affections gently lead us on,
> Until the breath of this corporeal frame,
> And even the motion of our human blood

*"It is silent and speaks."

†"Young men of strong sensibility and meditative minds."—Coleridge, "Biographia Literaria," Chap. xiv.

‡"Feast of Brougham Castle."

Digitized by Google

> Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
> In body, and become a living soul;
> While with an eye made quiet by the power
> Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
> We see into the life of things."*

And therefore he has had a whole host of sacred imitators. Mr. Keble, for example, has translated him for women: he has himself told us that he owed to Wordsworth the tendency *ad sanctiora* which is the mark of his own writings; and in fact he has but adapted the tone and habit of reverence, which his master applied to common objects and the course of the seasons, to sacred objects and the course of the ecclesiastical year, — diffusing a mist of sentiment and devotion altogether delicious to a gentle and timid devotee. Hartley Coleridge is another translator: he has applied to the sensuous beauties and seductive parts of external nature the same *cultus* which Wordsworth applied to the bare and the abstract. It is

> "That fair beauty which no eye can see,
> . . . that sweet music which no ear can measure;"†

it is, as it were, female beauty in wood and water; it is Rydal Water on a shining day; it is the gloss of the world, with the knowledge that it is gloss; the sense of beauty, as in some women, with the feeling that yet it is hardly theirs.

> "The vale of Tempe had in vain been fair,
> Green Ida never deemed the nurse of Jove,
> Each fabled stream beneath its covert grove
> Had idly murmured to the idle air,
> The shaggy wolf had kept his horrid lair
> In Delphi's cell and old Trophonius's cave,
> And the wild wailing of the Ionian wave
> Had never blended with the sweet despair
> Of Sappho's death-song, if the sight inspired
> Saw only what the visual organs show;

*"Tintern Abbey."

†Hartley Coleridge, Sonnet.

Digitized by Google

If heaven-born phantasy no more required
Than what within the sphere of sense may grow.
The beauty to perceive of earthly things,
The mounting soul must heavenward prune her wings."*

And he knew it himself; he has sketched the essence of his works:—

"Whither is gone the wisdom and the power
That ancient sages scattered with the notes
Of thought-suggesting lyres? The music floats
In the void air; e'en at this breathing hour,
In every cell and every blooming bower
The sweetness of old lays is hovering still:
But the strong soul, the self-constraining will,
The rugged root that bare the winsome flower,
Is weak and withered. Were we like the fays
That sweetly nestle in the foxglove bells,
Or lurk and murmur in the rose-lipped shells
Which Neptune to the earth for quit-rent pays,
Then might our pretty modern Philomels
Sustain our spirits with their roundelays."

We had more to say of Hartley: we were to show that his "Prometheus" was defective,—that its style had no Greek severity, no defined outline; that he was a critic as well as a poet, though in a small detached way, and what is odd enough, that he could criticize in rhyme; we were to make plain how his heart was in the right place, how his love affairs were hopeless, how he was misled by his friends: but our time is done and our space is full, and these topics must "go without day" of returning. We may end as we began: there are some that are bold and strong and incessant and energetic and hard, and to these is the world's glory; and some are timid and meek and impotent and cowardly and rejected and obscure. "One man esteemeth one day above another, another esteemeth every day alike."† And so of Hartley, whom few regarded. He had a

* Hartley Coleridge, Sonnet.
† Rom. xiv. 15.

Digitized by Google

resource: the stillness of thought, the gentleness of musing, the peace of nature.

"To his side the fallow-deer
Came, and rested without fear:
The eagle, lord of land and sea,
Stooped down to pay him fealty:
And both the undying fish that swim
Through Bowscale-tarn did wait on him;
The pair were servants of his eye,
In their immortality;
And glancing, gleaming, dark or bright,
Moved to and fro for his delight.
He knew the rocks which angels haunt,
Upon the mountains visitant,—
He hath kenned them taking wing;
And into caves where faeries sing
He hath entered; and been told
By Voices how men lived of old.
Among the heavens his eye can see
The face of thing that is to be;
And if that men report him right,
His tongue could whisper words of might.
—Now another day is come,
Fitter hope and nobler doom;
He hath thrown aside his crook,
And hath buried deep his book." *

"And now the streams may sing for others' pleasure,
The hills sleep on in their eternity." †

He is gone from among them.

* "Feast of Brougham Castle."
† Hartley Coleridge, Sonnet.

Digitized by Google

*PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY.**

(1856.)

[All uncredited biographic details and quotations in this essay are from Medwin. — Ed.]

After the long biography of Moore,† it is half a comfort to think of a poet as to whom our information is but scanty. The few intimates of Shelley seem inclined to go to their graves without telling in accurate detail the curious circumstances of his life; we are left to be content with vain "prefaces" and the circumstantial details of a remarkable blunderer.‡ We know something, however, — we know enough to check our inferences from his writings: in some moods it is pleasant not to have them disturbed by long volumes of memoirs and anecdotes.

One peculiarity of Shelley's writing makes it natural that at times we should not care to have, that at times we should wish for, a full biography: no writer has left so clear an image of himself in his writings, — when we remember them as a whole, we seem to want no more; no writer, on the other hand, has left so many little allusions which we should be glad to have explained, which the patient patriarch would not perhaps have endured that any one should comprehend while he did not. The reason is, that Shelley has combined the use of the two

* The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Edited by Mrs. Shelley. 1853.

Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations, and Fragments. By Percy Bysshe Shelley. Edited by Mrs. Shelley. 1854.

The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley. By Captain Thomas Medwin. 1847.

† Lord John Russell's eight-volume publication. — Ed.

‡ Medwin. — Ed.

Digitized by Google

great modes by which writers leave with their readers the image of themselves. There is the art of self-delineation: some authors try in imagination to get outside themselves, — to contemplate their character as a fact, and to describe it and the movement of their own actions as external forms and images. Scarcely any one has done this as often as Shelley; there is hardly one of his longer works which does not contain a finished picture of himself in some point or under some circumstances. Again, some writers, almost or quite unconsciously, by a special instinct of style, give an idea of themselves. This is not peculiar to literary men: it is quite as remarkable among men of action. There are people in the world who cannot write the commonest letter on the commonest affair of business without giving a just idea of themselves. The Duke of Wellington is an example which at once occurs of this: you may read a dispatch of his about bullocks and horseshoe nails, and yet you will feel an interest,—a great interest; because somehow among the words seems to lurk the mind of a great general. Shelley has this peculiarity also: every line of his has a personal impress, an unconscious inimitable manner. And the two modes in which he gives an idea of himself concur: in every delineation we see the same simple intense being; as mythology found a naiad in the course of every limpid stream, so through each eager line our fancy sees the same panting image of sculptured purity.

Shelley is probably the most remarkable instance of the pure impulsive character, — to comprehend which requires a little detail. Some men are born under the law: their whole life is a continued struggle between the lower principles of their nature and the higher. These are what are called "men of principle"; each of their best actions is a distinct choice between conflicting motives. One propension would bear them here, another there, a third would hold them still:

Digitized by Google

into the midst the living will goes forth in its power, and selects whichever it holds to be best. The habitual supremacy of conscience in such men gives them an idea that they only exert their will when they do right; when they do wrong they seem to "let their nature go," — they say that they are "hurried away." But in fact there is commonly an act of will in both cases: only it is weaker when they act ill, because in passably good men, if the better principles are reasonably strong, they conquer; it is only when very faint that they are vanquished. Yet the case is evidently not always so: sometimes the wrong principle is of itself and of set purpose definitely chosen, the better one is consciously put down. The very existence of divided natures is a conflict. This is no new description of human nature: for eighteen hundred years Christendom has been amazed at the description in St. Paul of the "law of his members" warring against the "law of his mind";* expressions most unlike in language, but not dissimilar in meaning, are to be found in some of the most familiar passages of Aristotle.

In extreme contrast to this is the nature which has no struggle: it is possible to conceive a character in which but one impulse is ever felt, — in which the whole being, as with a single breeze, is carried in a single direction. The only exercise of the will in such a being is in aiding and carrying out the dictates of the single propensity; and this is something. There are many of our powers and faculties only in a subordinate degree under the control of the emotions: the intellect itself in many moments requires to be bent to defined attention by compulsion of the will; no mere intensity of desire will thrust it on its tasks. But of what in most men is the characteristic action of the will — namely, self-control — such natures are hardly in want; an ultimate case could be imagined in which they would

* Rom. vii. 23.

Digitized by Google

not need it at all. They have no lower desires to pull down, for they have no higher ones which come into collision with them; the very words "lower" and "higher," involving the contemporaneous action and collision of two impulses, are inapplicable to them: there is no strife; all their soul impels them in a single line. This may be a quality of the highest character: indeed, in the highest character it will certainly be found; no one will question that the whole nature of the holiest Being tends to what is holy, without let, struggle, or strife, — it would be impiety to doubt it; yet this same quality may certainly be found in a lower — a much lower — mind than the highest. A level may be of any elevation; the absence of intestine commotion may arise from a sluggish dullness to eager aspirations; the one impulse which is felt may be any impulse whatever. If the idea were completely exemplified, one would instinctively say that a being with so single a mind could hardly belong to human nature; temptation is the mark of our life; we can hardly divest ourselves of the idea that it is indivisible from our character. As it was said of solitude, so it may be said of the sole dominion of a single impulse, "Whoso is devoted to it would seem to be either a beast or a god." *

Completely realized on earth this idea will never be; but approximations may be found, and one of the closest of those approximations is Shelley. We fancy his mind placed in the light of thought, with pure subtle fancies playing to and fro. On a sudden an impulse arises; it is alone, and has nothing to contend with: it cramps the intellect, pushes aside the fancies, constrains the nature; it bolts forward into action. Such a character is an extreme puzzle

* "Whosoever is delighted in solitude is either a wild beast or a god." — Bacon, Essay on Friendship; from Aristotle's "Politica," Book i.: — "He who is unable to mingle in society . . . is no part of the state, so that he is either a wild beast or a divinity."

Digitized by Google

to external observers. From the occasionality of its impulses it will often seem silly; from their singularity, strange; from their intensity, fanatical. It is absurdest in the more trifling matters. There is a legend of Shelley, during an early visit to London, flying along the street, catching sight of a new microscope, buying it in a moment; pawning it the instant afterwards to relieve some one in the same street in distress. The trait may be exaggerated, but it is characteristic; it shows the sudden irruption of his impulses, their abrupt force and curious purity.

The predominant impulse in Shelley from a very early age was "a passion for reforming mankind." Mr. Newman* has told us in his "Letters from the East" how much he and his half-missionary associates were annoyed at being called "young people trying to convert the world": in a strange land, ignorant of the language, beside a recognized religion, in the midst of an immemorial society, the aim, though in a sense theirs, seemed ridiculous when ascribed to them. Shelley would not have felt this at all: no society, however organized, would have been too strong for him to attack; he would not have paused; the impulse was upon him; he would have been ready to preach that mankind were to be "free, equal, and pure, and wise,"† — in favor of "justice and truth and time and the world's natural sphere,"‡ — in the Ottoman Empire, or to the Czar, or to George III. Such truths were independent of time and place and circumstance; some time or other, something or somebody (his faith was a little vague) would most certainly intervene to establish them. It was this placid undoubting confidence which irritated the positive and skeptical mind of Hazlitt: —

* Francis W. As the British Museum has no copy of this work, I cannot give chapter and verse. — Ed.

† "Revolt of Islam," Canto vii., Stanza xxxiii.

‡ Ibid., Stanza xxxi.

Digitized by Google

"The author of the 'Prometheus Unbound,'" he tells us, "has a fire in his eye, a fever in his blood, a maggot in his brain, a hectic flutter in his speech, which mark out the philosophic fanatic. He is sanguine-complexioned and shrill-voiced. As is often observable in the case of religious enthusiasts, there is a slenderness of constitutional stamina which renders the flesh no match for the spirit. His bending, flexible form appears to take no strong hold of things, does not grapple with the world about him, but slides from it like a river, —

"'And in its liquid texture mortal wound
Receives, no more than can the fluid air.'*

The shock of accident, the weight of authority, make no impression on his opinions, which retire like a feather, or rise from the encounter unhurt, through their own buoyancy. He is clogged by no dull system of realities, no earth-bound feelings, no rooted prejudices, by nothing that belongs to the mighty trunk and hard husk of nature and habit; but is drawn up by irresistible levity to the regions of mere speculation and fancy, to the sphere of air and fire, where his delighted spirit floats in 'seas of pearl and clouds of amber.'† There is no *caput mortuum* of worn-out threadbare experience to serve as ballast to his mind; it is all volatile intellectual salt-of-tartar, that refuses to combine its evanescent, inflammable essence with anything solid or anything lasting. Bubbles are to him the only realities: touch them, and they vanish. Curiosity is the only proper category of his mind; and though a man in knowledge, he is a child in feeling."‡

And so on with vituperation. No two characters could indeed be found more opposite than the open, eager, buoyant poet, and the dark, threatening, unbelieving critic.

It is difficult to say how far such a tendency under some circumstances might not have carried Shelley into positions most alien to an essential benevolence. It is most dangerous to be possessed with an idea: Dr. Arnold used to say that he had studied the life

*"Nor in their liquid texture mortal wound
Receive, no more than can the fluid air."
—"Paradise Lost," Book vi.

†Probably a reference to "seas of milk and ships of amber," in Otway's "Venice Preserved," last words of Act v. — ED.

‡Essay "On Paradox and the Commonplace," in the "Table Talk."

Digitized by Google

of Robespierre with the greatest personal benefit. No personal purity is a protection against insatiable zeal; it almost acts in the opposite direction, — the less a man is conscious of inferior motives, the more likely is he to fancy that he is doing God service. There is no difficulty in imagining Shelley cast by the accident of fortune into the Paris of the Revolution; hurried on by its ideas, undoubting in its hopes, wild with its excitement, going forth in the name of freedom conquering and to conquer: and who can think that he would have been scrupulous how he attained such an end? It was in him to have walked towards it over seas of blood; one could almost identify him with St. Just, the "fair-haired republican."

On another and a more generally interesting topic, Shelley advanced a theory which amounts to a deification of impulse.

"Love," he tells us, "is inevitably consequent upon the perception of loveliness. Love withers under constraint; its very essence is liberty; it is compatible neither with obedience, jealousy, nor fear; it is there most pure, perfect, and unlimited, where its votaries live in confidence, equality, and unreserve. . . . A husband and wife ought to continue [only] so long united as they love each other. Any law which should bind them to cohabitation for one moment after the decay of their affection would be a most intolerable tyranny, and the most unworthy of toleration. How odious a usurpation of the right of private judgment should that law be considered which should make the ties of friendship indissoluble, in spite of the caprices, the inconstancy, the fallibility . . . of the human mind! And by so much would the fetters of love be heavier and more unendurable than those of friendship, as love is more vehement and capricious, more dependent on those delicate peculiarities of imagination, and less capable of reduction to the ostensible merits of the object."

This passage, no doubt, is from an early and crude essay, one of the notes to "Queen Mab"; and there are many indications in his latter years that though he might hold in theory that "constancy has nothing

Digitized by Google

virtuous in itself," yet in practice he shrank from breaking a tie hallowed by years of fidelity and sympathy. But though his conduct was doubtless higher than his creed, there is no evidence that his creed was ever changed: the whole tone of his works is on the other side; the "Epipsychidion" could not have been written by a man who attached a moral value to constancy of mind. And the whole doctrine is most expressive of his character: a quivering sensibility endured only the essence of the most refined love; it is intelligible that one who bowed in a moment to every desire should have attached a kind of consecration to the most pure and eager of human passions.

The evidence of Shelley's poems confirms this impression of him: the characters which he delineates have all this same kind of pure impulse. The reforming impulse is especially felt: in almost every one of his works there is some character of whom all we know is, that he or she had this passionate disposition to reform mankind; we know nothing else about them, and they are all the same. Laon, in the "Revolt of Islam," does not differ at all from Lionel, in "Rosalind and Helen"; Laon differs from Cythna, in the former poem, only as male from female. Lionel is delineated, though not with Shelley's greatest felicity, in a single passage:—

"Yet through those dungeon walls there came
Thy thrilling light, O Liberty!
And as the meteor's midnight flame
Startles the dreamer, sunlike truth
Flashed on his visionary youth,
And filled him, not with love, but faith,
And hope, and courage mute in death;
For love and life in him were twins,
Born at one birth: in every other
First life, then love, its course begins,
Though they be children of one mother;
And so through this dark world they fleet
Divided, till in death they meet:

Digitized by Google

But he loved all things ever. Then
He passed amid the strife of men,
And stood at the throne of armèd power
Pleading for a world of woe;
Secure as one on a rock-built tower
O'er the wrecks which the surge trails to and fro,
'Mid the passions wild of human-kind
He stood, like a spirit calming them:
For, it was said, his words could bind
Like music the lulled crowd, and stem
That torrent of unquiet dream
Which mortals truth and reason deem,
But is revenge and fear and pride.
Joyous he was; and hope and peace
On all who heard him did abide,
Raining like dew from his sweet talk,
As, where the evening star may walk
Along the brink of the gloomy seas,
Liquid mists of splendor quiver."

Such is the description of all his reformers in calm; in times of excitement, they all burst forth:—

"Fear not the tyrants shall rule forever,
Or the priests of the bloody faith:
They stand on the brink of that mighty river
Whose waves they have tainted with death;
It is fed from the depths of a thousand dells,
Around them it foams and rages and swells:
And their swords and their sceptres I floating see,
Like wrecks, in the surge of eternity."*

In his more didactic poems it is the same: all the world is evil, and will be evil, until some unknown conqueror shall appear,—a teacher by rhapsody and a conqueror by words,—who shall at once reform all evil. Mathematicians place great reliance on the unknown-symbol, great x; Shelley did more,—he expected it would take life and reform our race. Such impersonations are of course not real men: they are mere incarnations of a desire. Another passion, which no man has ever felt more strongly than

* "Rosalind and Helen."

Digitized by Google

Shelley, — the desire to penetrate the mysteries of existence (by Hazlitt profanely called "curiosity"), — is depicted in "Alastor" as the sole passion of the only person in the poem: —

"By solemn vision and bright silver dream
His infancy was nurtured. Every sight
And sound from the vast earth and ambient air
Sent to his heart its choicest impulses.
The fountains of divine philosophy
Fled not his thirsting lips; and all of great
Or good or lovely which the sacred past
In truth or fable consecrates, he felt
And knew. When early youth had past, he left
His cold fireside and alienated home
To seek strange truths in undiscovered lands.
Many a wide waste and tangled wilderness
Has lured his fearless steps; and he has bought
With his sweet voice and eyes, from savage men,
His rest and food."

He is cheered on his way by a beautiful dream, and the search to find it again mingles with the shadowy quest. It is remarkable how great is the superiority of the personification in "Alastor," though one of his earliest writings, over the reforming abstractions of his other works. The reason is, its far greater closeness to reality: the one is a description of what he was, the other of what he desired to be. Shelley had nothing of the magic influence, the large insight, the bold strength, the permeating eloquence, which fit a man for a practical reformer; but he had, in perhaps an unequaled and unfortunate measure, the famine of the intellect — the daily insatiable craving after the highest truth — which is the passion of "Alastor." So completely did he feel it, that the introductory lines of the poem almost seem to identify him with the hero; at least they express sentiments which would have been exactly dramatic in his mouth: —

"Mother of this unfathomable world!
Favor my solemn song; for I have loved

Digitized by Google

Thee ever, and thee only: I have watched
Thy shadow and the darkness of thy steps,
And my heart ever gazes on the depth
Of thy deep mysteries. I have made my bed
In charnels and on coffins, where black Death
Keeps record of the trophies won from thee,
Hoping to still these obstinate questionings
Of thee and thine, by forcing some lone ghost,
Thy messenger, to render up the tale
Of what we are. In lone and silent hours,
When night makes a weird sound of its own stillness,
Like an inspired and desperate alchymist
Staking his very life on some dark hope,
Have I mixed awful talk and asking looks
With my most innocent love, until strange tears,
Uniting with those breathless kisses, made
Such magic as compels the charmèd night
To render up thy charge; and though ne'er yet
Thou hast unveiled thy inmost sanctuary,
Enough from incommunicable dream
And twilight phantasms and deep noonday thought
Has shone within me, that serenely now
And moveless (as a long-forgotten lyre
Suspended in the solitary dome
Of some mysterious and deserted fane),
I wait thy breath, Great Parent, — that my strain
May modulate with murmurs of the air,
And motions of the forests and the sea,
And voice of living beings, and woven hymns
Of night and day, and the deep heart of man."

The accompaniments are fanciful; but the essential passion was his own.

These two forms of abstract personification exhaust all which can be considered characters among Shelley's poems, — one poem excepted. Of course all his works contain "Spirits," "Phantasms," "Dream No. 1," and "Fairy No. 3"; but these do not belong to this world. The higher air seems never to have been favorable to the production of marked character: with almost all poets the inhabitants of it are prone to a shadowy thinness; in Shelley, the habit

Digitized by Google

of frequenting mountain tops has reduced them to evanescent mists of lyrical energy. One poem of Shelley's, however, has two beings of another order: creations which, if not absolutely dramatic characters of the first class, not beings whom we know better than we know ourselves, are nevertheless very high specimens of the second, persons who seem like vivid recollections from our intimate experience. In this case the dramatic execution is so good that it is difficult to say why the results are not quite of the first rank. One reason of this is perhaps their extreme simplicity: our imaginations, warned by consciousness and outward experience of the wonderful complexity of human nature, refuse to credit the existence of beings all whose actions are unmodified consequences of a single principle. These two characters are Beatrice Cenci and her father Count Cenci. In most of Shelley's poems — he died under thirty — there is an extreme suspicion of aged persons: in actual life he had plainly encountered many old gentlemen who had no belief in the complete and philosophical reformation of mankind. There is indeed an old hermit in the "Revolt of Islam" who is praised (Captain Medwin identifies him with a Dr. Some One who was kind to Shelley at Eton); but in general the old persons in his poems are persons whose authority it is desirable to disprove: —

> "Old age, with its gray hair,
> And wrinkled legends of unworthy things,
> And icy sneers, is naught."*

The less its influence, he evidently believes, the better. Not unnaturally, therefore, he selected for a tragedy a horrible subject from Italian story, in which an old man, accomplished in this world's learning, renowned for the "cynic sneer of o'er-experienced sin," is the principal evil agent. The character of Count Cenci is that of a man who of set principle does evil for evil's sake. He loves "the sight of agony": —

*"Revolt of Islam," Canto ii., stanza xxxiii.

Digitized by Google

> "All men delight in sensual luxury;
> All men enjoy revenge; and most exult
> Over the tortures they can never feel,
> Flattering their secret peace with others' pain:
> But I delight in nothing else."

If he regrets his age, it is from the failing ability to do evil:—

> "True, I was happier than I am while yet
> Manhood remained to act the thing I thought;
> While lust was sweeter than revenge: and now
> Invention palls."

It is this that makes him contemplate the violation of his daughter:—

> "There yet remains a deed to act,
> Whose horror might make sharp an appetite
> Duller than mine."

Shelley, though a habitual student of Plato,—the greatest modern writer who has taken great pleasure in his writings,—never seems to have read any treatise of Aristotle, otherwise he would certainly seem to have derived from that great writer the idea of the ἀκόλαστος;* yet in reality the idea is as natural to Shelley as any man,—more likely to occur to him than to most. Children think that everybody who is bad is very bad: their simple eager disposition only understands the doing what they wish to do; they do not refine; if they hear of a man doing evil, they think he wishes to do it,—that he has a special impulse to do evil, as they have to do what they do. Something like this was the case with Shelley: his mind, impulsive and childlike, could not imagine the struggling kind of characters,—either those which struggle with their lower nature and conquer or those which struggle and are vanquished, either the ἐγκρατής or the ἀκρατής† of the old thinker; but he could comprehend that which is in reality

* "Unrestrained" (boundless in sensuality).

† With and without self-mastery.

Digitized by Google

far worse than either, the being who wishes to commit sin because it is sin, who is as it were possessed with a demon hurrying him out, hot and passionate, to vice and crime. The innocent child is whirled away by one impulse; the passionate reformer by another; the essential criminal, if such a being be possible, by a third: they are all beings, according to one division, of the same class. An imaginative mind like Shelley's, belonging to the second of these types, naturally is prone in some moods to embody itself under the forms of the third; it is, as it were, the antithesis to itself.

Equally simple is the other character, that of Beatrice. Even before her violation, by a graphic touch of art, she is described as absorbed, or beginning to be absorbed, in the consciousness of her wrongs:—

> "As I have said, speak to me not of love.
> Had you a dispensation, I have not;
> Nor will I leave this home of misery
> Whilst my poor Bernard, and that gentle lady
> To whom I owe life and these virtuous thoughts,
> Must suffer what I still have strength to share.
> Alas, Orsino! all the love that once
> I felt for you is turned to bitter pain.
> Ours was a youthful contract, which you first
> Broke by assuming vows no pope will loose:
> And thus I love you still, but holily,
> Even as a sister or a spirit might;
> And so I swear a cold fidelity."

After her violation, her whole being is absorbed by one thought,—how and by what subtle vengeance she can expiate the memory of her shame. These are all the characters in Shelley; an impulsive unity is of the essence of them all.

The same characteristic of Shelley's temperament produced also most marked effects on his speculative opinions. The peculiarity of his creed early brought him into opposition to the world. His education seems to have been principally directed by his father,

Digitized by Google

of whom the only description which has reached us is not favorable. Sir Timothy Shelley, according to Captain Medwin, was an illiterate country gentleman of an extinct race. He had been at Oxford, where he learned nothing; had made the "grand tour," from which he brought back "a smattering of bad French and a bad picture of an eruption at Vesuvius." He had the air of the "old school," and the habit of throwing it off which distinguished that school. Lord Chesterfield himself was not easier on matters of morality: he used to tell his son that he would provide for natural children *ad infinitum*, but would never forgive his making a *mésalliance*. On religion his opinions were very lax. He indeed "required his servants," we are told, "to attend church," and even, on rare occasions, with superhuman virtue, attended himself; but there, as with others of that generation, his religion ended. He doubtless did not feel that any more could be required of him; he was not consciously insincere, but he did not in the least realize the opposition between the religion which he professed and the conduct which he pursued. Such a person was not likely to influence a morbidly sincere imaginative nature in favor of the doctrines of the Church of England. Shelley went from Eton, where he had been singular, to Oxford, where he was more so. He was a fair classical scholar; but his real mind was given to out-of-school knowledge. He had written a novel; he had studied chemistry; when pressed in argument, he used to ask, "What then does Condorcet say upon the subject?" This was not exactly the youth for the University of Oxford in the year 1810. A distinguished pupil of that University once observed to us, "The use of the University of Oxford is, that no one can overread themselves there; the appetite for knowledge is repressed; a blight is thrown over the ingenuous mind," etc. And possibly it may be so: considering how small a space literary knowledge fills in the

Digitized by Google

busy English world, it may not be without its advantages that any mind prone to bookish enthusiasm should be taught by the dryness of its appointed studies, the want of sympathy of its teachers, and a rough contact with average English youth, that studious enthusiasm must be its own reward; that in this country it will meet with little other; that it will not be encouraged in high places. Such discipline may, however, be carried too far: a very enthusiastic mind may possibly by it be turned in upon itself; this was the case with Shelley. When he first came up to Oxford, physics was his favorite pursuit. On chemistry especially he used to be eloquent:—"The galvanic battery," said he, "is a new engine. It has been used hitherto to an insignificant extent; yet it has worked wonders already. What will not an extraordinary combination of troughs of colossal magnitude, a well-arranged system of hundreds of metallic plates, effect?" Nature, however, like the world, discourages a wild enthusiasm. "His chemical operations seemed to an unskillful observer to promise nothing but disasters. He had blown himself up at Eton; he had inadvertently swallowed some mineral poison, which he declared had seriously injured his health, and from the effects of which he should never recover; his hands, his clothes, his books, and his furniture were stained and covered by medical acids," and so on. Disgusted with these and other failures, he abandoned physics for metaphysics; he rushed headlong into the form of philosophy then popular. It is not likely that he ever read Locke, and it is easy to imagine the dismay with which the philosopher would have regarded so "heady and skittish" a disciple; but he continually invoked Locke as an authority, and was really guided by the French expositions of him then popular. Hume of course was not without his influence. With such teachers only to control him, an excitable poet rushed in a moment to materialism, and thence

Digitized by Google

to atheism. Deriving any instruction from the University was, according to him, absurd: he wished to convert the University. He issued a kind of thesis, stating by way of interrogatory all the difficulties of the subject; called it the "Necessity of Atheism," and sent it to the professors, heads of houses, and several bishops. The theistic belief of his college was equal to the occasion. "It was a fine spring morning on Lady Day in the year 1811, when," says a fellow-student, "I went to Shelley's rooms. He was absent; but before I had collected our books he rushed in. He was terribly agitated. I anxiously inquired what had happened. — 'I am expelled!'" He then explained that he had been summoned before the Master and some of the fellows; that as he was unable to deny the authorship of the essay, he had been expelled, and ordered to quit the college the next morning at latest. He had wished to be put on his trial more regularly, and stated to the Master that England was "a free country"; but without effect, — he was obliged to leave Oxford. His father was very angry: "if he had broken the Master's windows, one could have understood it;" but to be expelled for publishing a *book* seemed an error incorrigible, because incomprehensible.

These details at once illustrate Shelley's temperament, and enable us to show that the peculiarity of his opinions arose out of that temperament. He was placed in circumstances which left his eager mind quite free. Of his father we have already spoken; there was no one else to exercise a subduing or guiding influence over him: nor would his mind have naturally been one extremely easy to influence, — through life he followed very much his own bent and his own thoughts; his most intimate associates exercised very little control over his belief. He followed his nature; and that nature was in a singular degree destitute of certain elements which most materially guide ordinary men. It seems most likely that a

Digitized by Google

person prone to isolated impulse will be defective in the sensation of conscience: there is scarcely room for it. When, as in common conflicting characters, the whole nature is daily and hourly in a perpetual struggle, the faculty which decides what elements in that nature are to have the supremacy is daily and hourly appealed to. Passions are contending; life is a discipline; there is a reference every moment to the directory of the discipline, the order-book of the passions. In temperaments not exposed to the ordinary struggle there is no such necessity: their impulse guides them; they have little temptation, are scarcely under the law, have hardly occasion to consult the statute book. In consequence, simple and beautiful as such minds often are, they are deficient in the sensation of duty; have no haunting idea of right or wrong; show an easy *abandon* in place of a severe self-scrutiny. At first it might seem that such minds lose little: they are exempted from the consciousness of a code to whose provisions they need little access. But such would be the conclusion only from a superficial view of human nature: the whole of our inmost faith is a series of intuitions, and experience seems to show that the intuitions of conscience are the beginning of that series. Childhood has little which can be called a religion: the shows of this world, the play of its lights and shadows, suffice. It is in the collision of our nature, which occurs in youth, that the first real sensation of faith is felt. Conscience is often then morbidly acute; a flush passes over the youthful mind; the guiding instinct is keen and strong, like the passions with which it contends. At the first struggle of our nature commences our religion. Childhood will utter the words; in early manhood, when we become half unwilling to utter them, they begin to have a meaning. The result of history is similar. The whole of religion rests on a faith that the universe is solely ruled by an almighty and all-perfect Being; this strengthens

Digitized by Google

with the moral cultivation and grows with the improvement of mankind. It is the assumed axiom of the creed of Christendom, and all that is really highest in our race may have the degree of its excellence tested by the degree of the belief in it; but experience shows that the belief only grows very gradually. We see at various times, and now, vast outlying nations in whom the conviction of morality—the consciousness of a law—is but weak; and there the belief in an all-perfect God is half forgotten, faint, and meager. It exists as something between a tradition and a speculation: but it does not come forth on the solid earth; it has no place in the "business and bosoms"* of men; it is thrust out of view even when we look upwards, by fancied idols and dreams of "the stars in their courses."† Consider the state of the Jewish, as compared with the better part of the pagan, world of old. On the one side we see civilization, commerce, the arts, a great excellence in all the exterior of man's life: a sort of morality sound and sensible, placing the good of man in a balanced moderation within and good looks without, in a combination of considerate good sense with the *air* of aristocratic—or, as it was said, "godlike"—refinement. We see, in a word, civilization and the ethics of civilization; the first polished, the other elaborated and perfected: but this is all,—we do not see faith. We see in some quarters rather a horror of the *curiosus deus* interfering, controlling, watching, never letting things alone, disturbing the quiet of the world with punishment and the fear of punishment. The Jewish side of the picture is different. We see a people who have perhaps an inaptitude for independent civilization, who in secular pursuits have only been assistants and attendants on other nations during the whole history of mankind. These have no equable, beautiful morality like the others; but instead a gnawing,

*Bacon, Dedication to Essays. †Judges v. 20.

Digitized by Google

abiding, depressing — one might say a slavish — ceremonial, excessive sense of law and duty. This nation has faith: by a link not logical, but ethical, this intense, eating, abiding supremacy of conscience is connected with a deep daily sense of a watchful, governing, and jealous God; and from the people of the law arises the gospel, — the sense of duty, when awakened, awakens not only the religion of the law, but in the end the other religious intuitions which lie round about it. The faith of Christendom has arisen not from a great people, but from "the least of all people," — from the people whose anxious legalism was a noted contrast to the easy, impulsive life of pagan nations. In modern language, conscience is the *converting* intuition; that which turns men from the world without to that within, — from the things which are seen to the realities which are not seen. In a character like Shelley's, where this haunting, abiding, oppressive moral feeling is wanting or defective, the religious belief in an almighty God which springs out of it is likely to be defective likewise.

In Shelley's case this deficiency was aggravated by what may be called the "abstract" character of his intellect. We have shown that no character except his own, and characters most strictly allied to his own, are delineated in his works. The tendency of his mind was rather to personify isolated qualities or impulses — equality, liberty, revenge, and so on — than to create out of separate parts or passions the single conception of an entire character. This is, properly speaking, the mythological tendency: all early nations show this marked disposition to conceive of separate forces and qualities as a kind of semi-persons; that is, not true actual persons with distinct characters, but beings who guide certain influences, and of whom all we know is, that they guide those influences. Shelley evinces a remarkable tendency to deal with mythology in this simple and elementary form. Other poets have breathed into

Digitized by Google

mythology a modern life; have been attracted by those parts which seem to have a religious meaning, and have enlarged that meaning while studying to embody it. With Shelley it is otherwise: the parts of mythology by which he is attracted are the bare parts, — the simple stories which Dr. Johnson found so tedious.

"Arethusa arose
From her couch of snows
In the Acroceraunian mountains:
From cloud and from crag,
With many a jag,
Shepherding her bright fountains,
She leapt down the rocks
With her rainbow locks
Streaming among the streams;
Her steps paved with green
The downward ravine
Which slopes to the western gleams;
And gliding and springing,
She went ever singing,
In murmurs as soft as sleep;
The earth seemed to love her,
And heaven smiled above her,
As she lingered towards the deep.
Then Alpheus bold,
On his glacier cold,
With his trident the mountains strook,"
Etc., etc.*

Arethusa and Alpheus are not characters: they are only the spirits of the fountain and the stream. When not writing on topics connected with ancient mythology, Shelley shows the same bent. "The Cloud" and the "Skylark" are more like mythology — have more of the impulse by which the populace, if we may so say, of the external world was first fancied into existence — than any other modern poems. There is indeed no habit of mind more remote from our solid and matter-of-fact existence; none which was once

* "Arethusa."

Digitized by Google

powerful, of which the present traces are so rare. In truth, Shelley's imagination achieved all it could with the materials before it. The materials for the creative faculty must be provided by the receptive faculty: before a man can imagine what will seem to be realities, he must be familiar with what are realities. The memory of Shelley had no heaped-up "store of life," no vast accumulation of familiar characters. His intellect did not tend to the strong grasp of realities: its taste was rather for the subtle refining of theories, the distilling of exquisite abstractions. His imagination personified what his understanding presented to it; it had nothing else to do.

He displayed the same tendency of mind—sometimes negatively and sometimes positively—in his professedly religious inquiries. His belief went through three stages: first materialism, then a sort of nihilism, then a sort of Platonism. In neither of them is the rule of the universe ascribed to a character: in the first and last it is ascribed to animated abstractions; in the second there is no universe at all. In neither of them is there any strong grasp of fact. The writings of the first period are clearly influenced by and modeled on Lucretius. He held the same abstract theory of nature: sometimes of half-personified atoms, moving hither and thither of themselves; at other times of a general pervading spirit of nature, holding the same relation to nature as a visible object that Arethusa the goddess bears to Arethusa the stream.

"The magic car moved on.
As they approached their goal
The coursers seemed to gather speed;
The sea no longer was distinguished; earth
Appeared a vast and shadowy sphere;
The sun's unclouded orb
Rolled through the black concave,—
Its rays of rapid light
Parted around the chariot's swifter course,
And fell like ocean's feathery spray

Digitized by Google

Dashed from the boiling surge
Before a vessel's prow.

"The magic car moved on.
Earth's distant orb appeared
The smallest light that twinkles in the heaven:
Whilst round the chariot's way
Innumerable systems rolled,
And countless spheres diffused
An ever-varying glory.
It was a sight of wonder: some
Were hornèd like the crescent moon;
Some shed a mild and silver beam
Like Hesperus o'er the western sea;
Some dashed athwart with trains of flame,
Like worlds to death and ruin driven;
Some shone like suns, and as the chariot passed,
Eclipsed all other light.

"Spirit of Nature! here,
In this interminable wilderness
Of worlds, at whose immensity
Even soaring fancy staggers,—
Here is thy fitting temple.
Yet not the lightest leaf
That quivers to the passing breeze
Is less instinct with thee;
Yet not the meanest worm
That lurks in graves and fattens on the dead
Less shares thy eternal breath.
Spirit of Nature! thou,
Imperishable as this scene,—
Here is thy fitting temple!"*

And he copied not only the opinions of Lucretius, but also his tone. Nothing is more remarkable than that two poets of the first rank should have felt a bounding joy in the possession of opinions which if true ought, one would think, to move an excitable nature to the keenest and deepest melancholy. That this life is all; that there is no God, but only atoms and a molding breath, — are singular doctrines

*"Queen Mab."

Digitized by Google

to be accepted with joy: they only could have been so accepted by wild minds bursting with imperious energy, knowing of no law, "wreaking thoughts upon expression" of which they knew neither the meaning nor the result.

From this stage Shelley's mind passed to another; but not immediately to one of greater belief. On the contrary, it was the doctrine of Hume which was called in to expel the doctrine of Epicurus. His previous teachers had taught him that there was nothing except matter: the Scotch skeptic met him at that point with the question, Is matter certain? Hume, as is well known, adopted the negative part from the theory of materialism and the theory of immaterialism, but rejected the positive side of both. He held, or professed to hold, that there was no substantial thing, either matter or mind, but only "sensations and impressions" flying about the universe, inhering in nothing and going nowhere. These, he said, were the only subjects of consciousness; all you felt was your feeling, and all you thought was your thought; the rest was only hypothesis. The notion that there was any "*you*" at all was a theory generally current among mankind, but not, unless proved, to be accepted by the philosopher. This doctrine, though little agreeable to the world in general, has an excellence in the eyes of youthful disputants: it is a doctrine which no one will admit and which no one can disprove. Shelley accordingly accepted it; indeed, it was a better description of his universe than of most people's: his mind was filled with a swarm of ideas, fancies, thoughts, streaming on without his volition, without plan or order; he might be pardoned for fancying that they were all, — he could not see the outward world for them, their giddy passage occupied him till he forgot himself. He has put down the theory in its barest form: —

"The most refined abstractions of logic conduct to a view of life which, though startling to the apprehension, is in fact that which

Digitized by Google

the habitual sense of its repeated combinations has extinguished in us. It strips, as it were, the painted curtain from this scene of things. I confess that I am one of those who am [*sic*] unable to refuse my assent to the conclusions of those philosophers who assert that nothing exists but as it is perceived."*

And again:—

"The view of life presented by the most refined deductions of the intellectual philosophy is that of unity. Nothing exists but as it is perceived. The difference is merely nominal between those two classes of thought which are vulgarly distinguished by the names of 'ideas' and of 'external objects.' Pursuing the same thread of reasoning, the existence of distinct individual minds, similar to that which is employed in now questioning its own nature, is likewise found to be a delusion. The words *I*, *you*, *they* are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblage of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind.

"Let it not be supposed that this doctrine conducts to the monstrous presumption that I, the person who now write and think, am that one mind. I am but a portion of it. The words *I* and *you* and *they* are grammatical devices invented simply for arrangement, and totally devoid of the intense and exclusive sense usually attached to them. It is difficult to find terms adequate to express so subtle a conception as that to which the Intellectual Philosophy has conducted us. We are on that verge where words abandon us; and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of how little we know!"†

On his wild nerves these speculations produced a great effect: their thin acuteness excited his intellect, their blank results appalled his imagination. He was obliged to pause in the last fragment of one of his metaphysical papers, "overcome by thrilling horror."‡ In this state of mind he began to study Plato; and it is probable that in the whole library of philosophy there is no writer so suitable to such a reader. A common modern author, believing in mind and matter, he would have put aside at once as loose and popular: he was attracted by a writer who, like

* "On Life," in Essays. † Ibid.

‡ Annotation on "Speculations in Metaphysics." See Essays.

Digitized by Google

himself, in some sense did not believe in either; who supplied him with subtle realities different from either, at once to be extracted by his intellect and to be glorified by his imagination. The theory of Plato that the all-apparent phenomena were unreal, he believed already; he had a craving to believe in something noble, beautiful, and difficult to understand: he was ready, therefore, to accept the rest of that theory, and to believe that these passing phenomena were imperfect types and resemblances — imperfect incarnations, so to speak — of certain immovable, eternal, archetypal realities. All his later writings are colored by that theory, though in some passages the remains of the philosophy of the senses with which he commenced appear in odd proximity to the philosophy of abstractions with which he concluded. There is perhaps no allusion in Shelley to the "Phædrus"; but no one can doubt which of Plato's ideas would be most attractive to the nature we have described. The most valuable part of Plato he did not comprehend; there is in Shelley none of that unceasing reference to ethical consciousness and ethical religion which has for centuries placed Plato first among the preparatory preceptors of Christianity. The general doctrine is that —

> "The one remains, the many change and pass;
> Heaven's light forever shines, earth's shadows fly;
> Life, like a dome of many-colored glass,
> Stains the white radiance of eternity,
> Until death tramples it to fragments."*

The particular worship of the poet is paid to that "one spirit" whose

> "Plastic stress
> Sweeps through the dull dense world, compelling there
> All new successions to the forms they wear;
> Torturing th' unwilling dross that checks its flight
> To its own likeness, as each mass may bear;
> And bursting in its beauty and its might
> From trees and beasts and men, into the heavens' light."†

* "Adonais," stanza lii. † Ibid, stanza xliii.

Digitized by Google

It is evident that not even in this, the highest form of creed to which he ever clearly attained, is there any such distinct conception of a character as is essential to a real religion. The conception of God is not to be framed out of a single attribute. Shelley has changed the "idea" of beauty into a spirit, and this probably for the purposes of poetry; he has given it life and animal motion: but he has done no more. The "spirit" has no will and no virtue; it is animated but unholy, alive but unmoral: it is an object of intense admiration, it is not an object of worship.

We have ascribed this quality of Shelley's writings to an abstract intellect; and in part, no doubt, correctly. Shelley had, probably by nature, such an intellect; it was self-inclosed, self-absorbed, teeming with singular ideas, remote from character and life: but so involved is human nature, that this tendency to abstraction, which we have spoken of as aggravating the consequences of his simple impulsive temperament, was itself aggravated by that temperament. It is a received opinion in metaphysics that the idea of personality is identical with the idea of will. A distinguished French writer has accurately expressed this.

"Le pouvoir," says M. Jouffroy, "que l'homme a de s'emparer de ses capacités naturelles et de les diriger fait de lui une *personne;* et c'est parceque les *choses* n'exercent pas ce pouvoir en elles-mêmes, qu'elles ne sont que des choses. Telle est la véritable différence qui distingue les choses des personnes. Toutes les natures possibles sont douées de certaines capacités: mais les unes ont reçu par-dessus les autres le privilége de se saisir d'ellesmêmes et de se gouverner, — celles-là sont des personnes; les autres en ont été privées, en sorte qu'elles n'ont point de part à ce qui se fait en elles, — celles-là sont les choses. Leurs capacités ne s'en développent pas moins, mais c'est exclusivement selon les lois auxquelles Dieu les a soumises. C'est Dieu qui gouverne en elles; il est la personne des choses, comme l'ouvrier est la personne de la montre. Ici la personne est hors de l'être; dans le sein même des choses, comme dans le sein de la montre, la personne ne se rencontre

Digitized by Google

pas; on ne trouve qu'une série de capacités qui se meuvent aveuglément, sans que la nature qui en est douée sache même ce qu'elles font. Aussi ne peut-on demander compte aux choses de ce qui se fait en elles; il faut s'adresser à Dieu, comme on s'adresse à l'ouvrier et non à la montre quand la montre va mal."*

And if this theory be true, — and doubtless it is an approximation to the truth, — it is evident that a mind ordinarily moved by simple impulse will have little distinct consciousness of personality. While thrust forward by such impulse, it is a mere instrument: outward things set it in motion; it goes where they bid, it exerts no will upon them; it is, to speak expressively, a mere conducting thing. When such a mind is free from such impulse, there is even less will: thoughts, feelings, ideas, emotions, pass before it in a sort of dream; for the time it is a mere perceiving thing. In neither case is there a trace of voluntary character. If we want a reason for anything, "il faut s'adresser à Dieu."

Shelley's political opinions were likewise the effervescence of his peculiar nature. The love of liberty is peculiarly natural to the simple impulsive mind. It feels irritated at the idea of a law: it fancies it does not need it; it really needs it less than other

* "The power a man has of grasping his faculties and controlling them makes him a *person*; and it is because *things* do not exercise this power on themselves that they are only things. Such is the true difference which distinguishes things from persons. All possible natures are endowed with certain capacities: but one kind have received above the others the privilege of seizing and governing themselves, — these are persons; the others have been deprived of it, so that they are no part of what is done to them, — these are things. Their capacities do not develop in the least, but follow solely the laws to which God has subjected them. It is God who governs in them; he is the person of things, as the mechanic is the person of the watch. Here the person is outside the being: in the very bosom of things, as in the bosom of the watch, no person is found; one finds only a series of capacities which move blindly, without the nature they are endowed with knowing itself what they are doing. Therefore, we cannot demand of things an account of what goes on among them; we must apply to God, as we apply to the mechanic and not the watch when the watch goes wrong." (From "Des Facultés de l'Âme Humaine.")

Digitized by Google

men.* Government seems absurd, society an incubus. It has hardly patience to estimate particular institutions: it wants to begin again, — to make a *tabula rasa* of all which men have created or devised; for they seem to have been constructed on a false system, for an object it does not understand. On this *tabula rasa* Shelley's abstract imagination proceeded to set up arbitrary monstrosities of "equality" and "love," which never will be realized among the children of men.

Such a mind is clearly driven to self-delineation. Nature, no doubt, in some sense remains to it: a dreamy mind — a mind occupied intensely with its own thoughts — will often have a peculiarly intense apprehension of anything which by the hard collision of the world it has been forced to observe. The scene stands out alone in the memory, is a refreshment from hot thoughts, grows with the distance of years. A mind like Shelley's, deeply susceptible to all things beautiful, has many pictures and images shining in its recollection which it recurs to, and which it is ever striving to delineate. Indeed, in such minds it is rather the picture in their mind which they describe than the original object; the "ideation," as some harsh metaphysicians call it, rather than the reality. A certain dream-light is diffused over it; a wavering touch, as of interfering fancy or fading recollection. The landscape has not the hues of the real world; it is modified in the *camera obscura* of the self-inclosed intelligence. Nor can such a mind long endure the cold process of external delineation: its own hot thoughts rush in; its favorite topic is itself and them. Shelley, indeed, as we observed before, carries this to an extent which no poet probably ever equaled: he described not only his character but his circumstances. We know that this is so in a large number of passages; if his poems were commented on by some one thoroughly familiar with the events of his life, we should doubtless find that

*A slip for "minds." — Ed.

Digitized by Google

it was so in many more. On one strange and painful scene his fancy was continually dwelling. In a gentle moment we have a dirge:—

"The warm sun is failing, the bleak wind is wailing,
The bare boughs are sighing, the pale flowers are dying,
And the year
On the earth her death-bed, in a shroud of leaves, dead
Is lying.
Come, months, come away,
From November to May,
In your saddest array;
Follow the bier
Of the dead cold year,
And like dim shadows watch by her sepulchre.

"The chill rain is falling, the nipt worm is crawling,
The rivers are swelling, the thunder is knelling
For the year;
The blithe swallows are flown, and the lizards each gone
To his dwelling.
Come, months, come away;
Put on white, black, and gray;
Let your light sisters play—
Ye, follow the bier
Of the dead cold year,
And make her grave green with tear on tear."*

In a frenzied mood he breaks forth into wildness:—

"She is still, she is cold
On the bridal couch;
One step to the white death-bed,
And one to the bier,
And one to the charnel,—and one, oh, where?
The dark arrow fled
In the noon.

"Ere the sun through heaven once more has rolled,
The rats in her heart
Will have made their nest,
And the worms be alive in her golden hair;
While the spirit that guides the sun
Sits throned in his flaming chair,
She shall sleep."†

*"Autumn." †Dirge at close of "Ginevra."

Digitized by Google

There is no doubt that these and a hundred other similar passages allude to the death of his first wife; as melancholy a story as ever shivered the nerves of an excitable being. The facts are hardly known to us, but they are something like these:—

In very early youth Shelley had formed a half-fanciful attachment to a cousin, a Miss Harriet Grove, who is said to have been attractive, and to whom, certainly, his fancy often went back in later and distant years. How deep the feeling was on either side we do not know. She seems to have taken an interest in the hot singular dreams which occupied his mind except only where her image might intrude, from which one might conjecture that she took unusual interest in him; she even wrote some chapters, or parts of some, in one of his boyish novels: and her parents doubtless thought "The Rosicrucian" could be endured, as Shelley was the heir to land and a baronetcy. His expulsion from Oxford altered all this. Probably he had always among his friends been thought a "singular young man," and they had waited in perplexity to see if the oddness would turn to unusual good or unusual evil; his atheistic treatise and its results seemed to show clearly the latter, and all communication with Miss Grove was instantly forbidden him. What she felt on the subject is not told us; probably some theistic and undreaming lover intervened, for she married in a short time. The despair of an excitable poet at being deprived of his mistress at the same moment that he was abandoned by his family, and in a measure by society, may be fancied, though it cannot be known. Captain Medwin observes:—

"Shelley, on this trying occasion, had the courage to live, in order that he might labor for one great object, — the advancement of the human race and the amelioration of society; and strengthened himself in a resolution to devote his energies to this ultimate end, being prepared to endure every obloquy, to make every sacrifice for its accomplishment; and would," such is the Captain's English, "if necessary, have died in the cause."

Digitized by Google

It does not appear, however, that disappointed love took solely the very unusual form of philanthropy. By chance, whether with or without leave does not appear, he went to see his second sister, who was at school at a place called Balham Hill, near London; and while walking in the garden with her, "a Miss Westbrook passed them." She was a "handsome blonde young lady, nearly sixteen"; and Shelley was much struck. He found out that her name was Harriett, — as he, after his marriage, anxiously expresses it, with two t's, "Harriett"; and he fell in love at once. She had the name of his first love; "fairer, though yet the same." After his manner, he wrote to her immediately. He was in the habit of doing this to people who interested him, either in his own or under an assumed name; and once, Captain Medwin says, carried on a long correspondence with Mrs. Hemans, then Miss Browne, under his (the Captain's) name, but which he, the deponent, was not permitted to peruse. In Miss Westbrook's case the correspondence had a more serious consequence. Of her character we can only guess a little. She was, we think, an ordinary blooming young lady of sixteen. Shelley was an extraordinary young man of nineteen, rather handsome, very animated, and expressing his admiration a little intensely. He was doubtless much the most aristocratic person she had ever spoken to; for her father was a retired innkeeper, and Shelley had always the air of a man of birth. There is a vision, too, of an elder sister, who made "Harriett dear" very uncomfortable. On the whole, the result may be guessed. At the end of August, 1811, — we do not know the precise day, — they were married at Gretna Green. Jests may be made on it; but it was no laughing matter in the life of the wife or the husband. Of the lady's disposition and mind we know nothing, except from Shelley, — a medium which must under the circumstances be thought a distorting one. We should

Digitized by Google

conclude that she was capable of making many people happy, though not of making Shelley happy. There is an ordinance of nature at which men of genius are perpetually fretting, but which does more good than many laws of the universe which they praise: it is, that ordinary women ordinarily prefer ordinary men. "Genius," as Hazlitt would have said, "puts them out:"* it is so strange; it does not come into the room as usual; it says "such things"; once it forgot to brush its hair. The common female mind prefers usual tastes, settled manners, customary conversation, defined and practical pursuits. And it is a great good that it should be so; nature has no wiser instinct. The average woman suits the average man; good health, easy cheerfulness, common charms suffice. If Miss Westbrook had married an every-day person, — a gentleman, suppose, in the tallow line, — she would have been happy, and have made him happy: her mind could have understood his life, her society would have been a gentle relief from unodoriferous pursuits. She had nothing in common with Shelley: his mind was full of eager thoughts, wild dreams, singular aspirations; the most delicate tact would probably have often failed, the nicest sensibility would have been jarred, affection would have erred, in dealing with such a being; a very peculiar character was required to enter into such a rare union of curious qualities. Some eccentric men of genius have indeed felt, in the habitual tact and serene nothingness of ordinary women, a kind of trust and calm; they have admired an instinct of the world which they had not, a repose of mind they could not share: but this is commonly in later years. A boy of twenty thinks he knows the world; he is too proud and happy in his own eager and shifting thoughts to wish to contrast them with repose. The commonplaceness of life goads him,

* "On the Disadvantages of Intellectual Superiority," in the "Table Talk":—"I do not think great intellectual attainments are any recommendation to the women. They puzzle them," etc.

Digitized by Google

placid society irritates him; bread is an incumbrance, upholstery tedious: he craves excitement; he wishes to reform mankind; you cannot convince him it is right to sew, in a world so full of sorrow and evil. Shelley was in this state; he hurried to and fro over England, pursuing theories and absorbed in plans. He was deep in metaphysics; had subtle disproofs of all religion; wrote several poems, which would have been a puzzle to a very clever young lady. There were pecuniary difficulties besides: neither of the families had approved of the match, and neither were inclined to support the household. Altogether, no one can be surprised that in less than three years the hasty union ended in a "separation by mutual consent"; the wonder is, that it lasted so long. — What her conduct was after the separation, is not very clear: there were "reports" about her at Bath, — perhaps a loquacious place. She was not twenty, probably handsome, and not improbably giddy: being quite without evidence, we cannot judge what was rumor and what was truth.* Shelley has not left us in similar doubt. After a year or two he traveled abroad with Mary, afterwards the second Mrs. Shelley, the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, — names most celebrated in those times, and even now known for their anti-matrimonial speculations. Of their "six-weeks' tour" abroad, in the year 1816, a record remains, and should be read by any persons who wish to learn what traveling was in its infancy. It was the year when the Continent was first thrown open to English travelers; and few, probably, adopted such singular means of locomotion as Shelley and his companions. First they tried walking, and had a very small ass to carry their portmanteau; then they tried a mule; then a *fiacre*, which drove away from them; afterwards they came to a raft. It was not, however, an unamusing journey.

* The evidence is now accessible. She was a far better intellectual mate for Shelley than here implied, and his desertion of her weights him with much of the responsibility for her fall. — ED.

Digitized by Google

At an ugly and out-of-the-way chateau near Brunnen Shelley began a novel, to be called "The Assassins," which he never finished, — probably never continued after his return; but which still remains, and is one of the most curious and characteristic specimens of his prose style. It was a refreshing intellectual tour; one of the most pleasant rambles of his life. On his return he was met by painful intelligence: his wife had destroyed herself. Of her state of mind we have again no evidence. She is said to have been deeply affected by the "reports" to which we have alluded; but whatever it was, Shelley felt himself greatly to blame. He had been instrumental in first dividing her from her family; had connected himself with her in a wild contract, from which neither could ever be set free: if he had not crossed her path, she might have been happy in her own way and in her own sphere. All this preyed upon his mind, and it is said he became mad; and whether or not his horror and pain went the length of actual frenzy, they doubtless approached that border-line of suffering excitement which divides the most melancholy form of sanity from the most melancholy form of insanity. In several poems he seems to delineate himself in the guise of a maniac: —

"'Of his sad history
I know but this,' said Maddalo: 'he came
To Venice a dejected man, and fame
Said he was wealthy, or he had been so.
Some thought the loss of fortune wrought him woe;
But he was ever talking in such sort
As you do, — but more sadly: he seemed hurt,
Even as a man with his peculiar wrong,
To hear but of the oppression of the strong,
Or those absurd deceits (I think with you
In some respects, you know) which carry through
The excellent impostors of this earth
When they outface detection. He had worth,
Poor fellow! but a humorist in his way.'

'Alas, what drove him mad?'

'I cannot say:

Digitized by Google

A lady came with him from France; and when
She left him and returned, he wandered then
About yon lonely isles of desert sand
Till he grew wild. He had no cash nor land
Remaining, — the police had brought him here;
Some fancy took him, and he would not bear
Removal: so I fitted up for him
Those rooms beside the sea, to please his whim;
And sent him busts and books and urns for flowers,
Which had adorned his life in happier hours,
And instruments of music. You may guess
A stranger could do little more or less
For one so gentle and unfortunate;
And those are his sweet strains, which charm the weight
From madman's chains, and make this hell appear
A heaven of sacred silence, hushed to hear.'

'Nay, this was kind of you, — he had no claim,
As the world says.'

'None but the very same
Which I on all mankind, were I, as he,
Fallen to such deep reverse. His melody
Is interrupted now: we hear the din
Of madmen, shriek on shriek, again begin;
Let us now visit him: after this strain
He ever communes with himself again,
And sees and hears not any.'

Having said
These words, we called the keeper, and he led
To an apartment opening on the sea:
There the poor wretch was sitting mournfully
Near a piano, his pale fingers twined
One with the other; and the ooze and wind
Rushed through an open casement, and did sway
His hair, and starred it with the brackish spray;
His head was leaning on a music-book,
And he was muttering; and his lean limbs shook;
His lips were pressed against a folded leaf,
In hue too beautiful for health, and grief
Smiled in their motions as they lay apart,
As one who wrought from his own fervid heart
The eloquence of passion: soon he raised
His sad meek face, and eyes lustrous and glazed,

Digitized by Google

And spoke, — sometimes as one who wrote, and thought
His words might move some heart that heeded not
If sent to distant lands; and then as one
Reproaching deeds never to be undone,
With wondering self-compassion; then his speech
Was lost in grief, and then his words came each
Unmodulated and expressionless,—
But that from one jarred accent you might guess
It was despair made them so uniform:
And all the while the loud and gusty storm
Hissed through the window, and we stood behind,
Stealing his accents from the envious wind,
Unseen. I yet remember what he said
Distinctly, such impression his words made."*

And casual illustrations — unconscious metaphors, showing a terrible familiarity — are borrowed from insanity in his subsequent works.

This strange story is in various ways deeply illustrative of his character. It shows how the impulsive temperament, not definitely intending evil, is hurried forward, so to say, *over* actions and crimes which would seem to indicate deep depravity, — which would do so in ordinary human nature, but which do not indicate in it anything like the same degree of guilt. Driven by singular passion across a tainted region, it retains no taint; on a sudden it passes through evil, but preserves its purity. So curious is this character, that a record of its actions may read like a libel on its life.

To some the story may also suggest whether Shelley's nature was one of those most adapted for love in its highest form. It is impossible to deny that he loved with a great intensity; yet it was with a certain narrowness, and therefore a certain fitfulness. Possibly a somewhat wider nature, taking hold of other characters at more points, — fascinated as intensely but more variously, stirred as deeply but through more complicated emotions, — is requisite for

* "Julian and Maddalo."

Digitized by Google

the highest and most lasting feeling; passion, to be enduring, must be many-sided. Eager and narrow emotions urge like the gadfly of the poet, but they pass away; they are single; there is nothing to revive them. Various as human nature must be the passion which absorbs that nature into itself. Shelley's mode of delineating women has a corresponding peculiarity: they are well described, but they are described under only one aspect. Every one of his poems, almost, has a lady whose arms are white, whose mind is sympathizing, and whose soul is beautiful. She has many names, — Cythna, Asia, Emily;* but these are only external disguises; she is indubitably the same person, for her character never varies. No character can be simpler: she is described as the ideal object of love in its most simple and elemental form; the pure object of the essential passion. She is a being to be loved in a single moment, with eager eyes and gasping breath; but you feel that in that moment you have seen the whole, — there is nothing to come to afterwards. The fascination is intense, but uniform; there is not the ever-varying grace, the ever-changing expression of the unchanging charm, that alone can attract for all time the shifting moods of a various and mutable nature.

The works of Shelley lie in a confused state, like the *disjecta membra*† of the poet of our boyhood; they are in the strictest sense "remains." It is absurd to expect from a man who died at thirty a long work of perfected excellence; all which at so early an age can be expected are fine fragments, casual expressions of single inspirations. Of these Shelley has written some that are nearly, and one or two perhaps that are quite, perfect; but he has not done more. It would have been better if he had not attempted so much. He would have done well to heed Goethe's caution to Eckermann: —

* "Revolt of Islam," "Prometheus Unbound," "Epipsychidion."
† "Scattered limbs."

Digitized by Google

"Beware of attempting a large work. . . . If you have a great work in your head, nothing else thrives near it, all other thoughts are repelled, and the pleasantness of life itself is for the time lost. What exertion and expenditure of mental force are required to arrange and round off a great whole; and then what powers, and what a tranquil undisturbed situation in life, to express it with the proper fluency! If you have erred as to the whole, all your toil is lost; and further, if, in treating so extensive a subject, you are not perfectly master of your material in the details, the whole will be defective, and censure will be incurred."*

Shelley did not know this. He was ever laboring at long poems, but he has scarcely left one which as a whole is worthy of him; you can point to none and say, This is Shelley. Even had he lived to an age of riper capacity, it may be doubted if a being so discontinuous, so easily hurried to and fro, would have possessed the settled, undeviating self-devotion that are necessary to a long and perfect composition; he had not, like Goethe, the cool shrewdness to watch for inspiration.

His success, as we have said, is in fragments; and the best of those fragments are lyrical. The very same isolation and suddenness of impulse which rendered him unfit for the composition of great works, rendered him peculiarly fit to pour forth on a sudden the intense essence of peculiar feeling "in profuse strains of unpremeditated art." Lord Macaulay has said that the words "bard" and "inspiration," generally so meaningless when applied to modern poets, have a meaning when applied to Shelley.† An idea, an emotion grew upon his brain; his breast heaved, his frame shook, his nerves quivered with the "harmonious madness" of imaginative concentration.

"Poetry," he himself tells us, "is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will. A man cannot say, 'I will compose poetry.' The greatest poet even cannot

* Conversations with Eckermann and Soret; Oxenford's translation. At Jena, Sept. 18, 1823.

† Essay on Southey's edition of the "Pilgrim's Progress."

Digitized by Google

say it: for the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness; this power arises from within, like the color of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our nature are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure. . . . Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds. We are aware of evanescent visitations of thought and feeling, sometimes associated with place or person, sometimes regarding our own mind alone, and always arising unforeseen and departing unbidden, but elevating and delightful beyond all expression; so that even in the desire and the regret they leave, there cannot but be pleasure, participating as it does in the nature of its object. It is, as it were, the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own; but its footsteps are like those of a wind over the sea, which the morning calm erases, and whose traces remain only, as on the wrinkled sand which paves it."*

In verse, Shelley has compared the skylark to a poet; we may turn back the description on his own art and his own mind:—

"Keen as are the arrows
Of that silver sphere
Whose intense lamp narrows
In the white dawn clear,
Until we hardly see, we feel that it is there.

"All the earth and air
With thy voice is loud;
As, when night is bare,
From one lonely cloud
The moon rains out her beams, and heaven is overflowed.

"What thou art we know not;
What is most like thee?
From rainbow clouds there flow not
Drops so bright to see,
As from thy presence showers a rain of melody.

. . . . . .

"Like a high-born maiden
In a palace tower,
Soothing her love-laden
Soul in secret hour
With music sweet as love, which overflows her bower;

* "A Defense of Poetry," in his Essays.

Digitized by Google

"Like a glow-worm golden
In a dell of dew,
Scattering unbeholden
Its aërial hue
Among the flowers and grass which screen it from the view;

"Like a rose embowered
In its own green leaves,
By warm winds deflowered,
Till the scent it gives
Makes faint with too much sweet these heavy-wingèd thieves.

"Sound of vernal showers
On the twinkling grass,
Rain-awakened flowers,
All that ever was
Joyous and clear and fresh, thy music doth surpass."

In most poets, unearthly beings are introduced to express peculiar removed essences of lyrical rapture; but they are generally failures. Lord Byron tried this kind of composition in "Manfred," and the result is an evident failure. In Shelley, such singing solitary beings are almost uniformly successful; while writing, his mind really for the moment was in the state in which theirs is supposed always to be, — he loved attenuated ideas and abstracted excitement; in expressing their nature he had but to set free his own.

Human nature is not, however, long equal to this sustained effort of remote excitement: the impulse fails, imagination fades, inspiration dies away. With the skylark it is well: —

"With thy clear keen joyance,
Languor cannot be;
Shadow of annoyance
Never came near thee:
Thou lovest; but ne'er knew love's sad satiety."

But in unsoaring human nature, languor comes, fatigue palls, melancholy oppresses, melody dies away. The universe is not all blue sky; there is the thick fog

Digitized by Google

and the heavy earth. "The world," says Mr. Emerson, "is mundane:" * a creeping sense of weight is part of the most aspiring nature; to the most thrilling rapture succeeds despondency, perhaps pain. To Shelley this was peculiarly natural. His dreams of reform, of a world which was to be, called up the imaginative ecstasy; his soul bounded forward into the future: but it is not possible even to the most abstracted and excited mind to place its happiness in the expected realization of impossible schemes, and yet not occasionally be uncertain of those schemes. The rigid frame of society, the heavy heap of traditional institutions, the solid slowness of ordinary humanity, depress the aspiring fancy. "Since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning." † Occasionally we must think of our fathers; no man can always dream of ever altering all which is. It is characteristic of Shelley, that at the end of his most rapturous and sanguine lyrics there intrudes the cold consciousness of this world. So with his Grecian dreams:—

"A brighter Hellas rears its mountains
From waves serener far;
A new Peneus rolls its fountains
Against the morning star.
Where fairer Tempes bloom, there sleep
Young Cyclads on a sunnier deep.

"A loftier Argo cleaves the main,
Fraught with a later prize;
Another Orpheus sings again,
And loves, and weeps, and dies;
A new Ulysses leaves once more
Calypso for his native shore."

But he ends:—

"Oh, cease! must hate and death return?
Cease! must men kill and die?

* I find no such words in his works. — Ed.
† 2 Peter iii. 4.

Digitized by Google

Cease! drain not to its dregs the urn
Of bitter prophecy.
The world is weary of the past, —
Oh, might it die or rest at last!" *

In many of his poems the failing of the feeling is as beautiful as its short moment of hope and buoyancy.

The excellence of Shelley does not, however, extend equally over the whole domain of lyrical poetry. That species of art may be divided — not perhaps with the accuracy of science, but with enough for the rough purposes of popular criticism — into the human and the abstract. The sphere of the former is of course the actual life, passions, and actions of real men. Such are the war-songs of rude nations especially: in that early age there is no subject for art but natural life and primitive passion; at a later time, when from the deposit of the *débris* of a hundred philosophies, a large number of half-personified abstractions are part of the familiar thoughts and language of all mankind, there are new objects to excite the feelings, — we might even say there are new feelings to be excited; the rough substance of original passion is sublimated and attenuated till we hardly recognize its identity. Ordinarily and in most minds the emotion loses in this process its intensity, or much of it; but this is not universal, — in some peculiar minds it is possible to find an almost dizzy intensity of excitement called forth by some fancied abstraction, remote altogether from the eyes and senses of men. The love lyric in its simplest form is probably the most intense expression of primitive passion; yet not in those lyrics where such intensity is the greatest — in those of Burns, for example — is the passion so dizzy, bewildering, and bewildered as in the "Epipsychidion" of Shelley, the passion of which never came into the real world at all, was only a fiction founded on

* "Hellas."

Digitized by Google

fact, and was wholly — and even Shelley felt it — inconsistent with the inevitable conditions of ordinary existence. In this point of view, and especially also taking account of his peculiar religious opinions, it is remarkable that Shelley should have taken extreme delight in the Bible as a composition: he is the least biblical of poets. The whole, inevitable, essential conditions of real life — the whole of its plain, natural joys and sorrows — are described in the Jewish literature as they are described nowhere else. Very often they are assumed rather than delineated; and the brief assumption is more effective than the most elaborate description. There is none of the delicate sentiment and enhancing sympathy which a modern writer would think necessary; the inexorable facts are dwelt on with a stern humanity, which recognizes human feeling though intent on something above it. Of all modern poets, Wordsworth shares the most in this peculiarity; perhaps he is the only recent one who has it at all. He knew the hills beneath whose shade "the generations are prepared":—

> Much did he see of men,
> . . . . . .
> Their passions and their feelings; chiefly those
> Essential and eternal in the heart,
> That 'mid the simpler forms of rural life
> Exist more simple in their elements,
> And speak a plainer language." *

Shelley has nothing of this. The essential feelings he hoped to change; the eternal facts he struggled to remove. Nothing in human life to him was inevitable or fixed; he fancied he could alter it all. His sphere is the "unconditioned"; he floats away into an imaginary Elysium or an expected Utopia, — beautiful and excellent, of course, but having nothing in common with the absolute laws of the present world. Even in the description of mere nature the difference may be noted. Wordsworth describes the earth as

* "Excursion," Book i.

Digitized by Google

we know it, with all its peculiarities; where there are moors and hills, where the lichen grows, where the slate-rock juts out. Shelley describes the universe. He rushes away among the stars; this earth is an assortment of imagery, he uses it to deck some unknown planet. He scorns "the smallest light that twinkles in the heavens": his theme is the vast, the infinite, the immeasurable. He is not of our home, nor homely; he describes not our world, but that which is common to all worlds, — the Platonic idea of a world. Where it can, his genius soars from the concrete and real into the unknown, the indefinite, and the void.

Shelley's success in the abstract lyric would prepare us for expecting that he would fail in attempts at eloquence. The mind which bursts forward of itself into the inane is not likely to be eminent in the composed adjustments of measured persuasion. A voluntary self-control is necessary to the orator: even when he declaims, he must only let himself go; a keen will must be ready, a wakeful attention at hand, to see that he does not say a word by which his audience will not be touched. The eloquence of "Queen Mab" is of that unpersuasive kind which is admired in the earliest youth, when things and life are unknown, when all that is intelligible is the sound of words.

Lord Macaulay, in a passage to which we have referred already, speaks of Shelley as having, more than any other poet, many of the qualities of the great old masters: two of these he has especially. In the first place, his imagination is classical rather than romantic. We should perhaps apologize for using words which have been used so often, but which hardly convey even now a clear and distinct meaning; yet they seem the best for conveying a distinction of this sort. When we attempt to distinguish the imagination from the fancy, we find that they are often related as a beginning to an ending.

Digitized by Google

On a sudden we do not know how a new image, form, idea, occurs to our minds; sometimes it is borne in upon us with a flash, sometimes we seem unawares to stumble upon it and find it as if it had long been there: in either case the involuntary, unanticipated appearance of this new thought or image is a primitive fact, which we cannot analyze or account for. We say it originated in our imagination or creative faculty, but this is a mere expression of the completeness of our ignorance: we could only define the imagination as the faculty which produces such effects, — we know nothing of it or its constitution. Again, on this original idea a large number of accessory and auxiliary ideas seem to grow or accumulate insensibly, casually, and without our intentional effort; the bare primitive form attracts a clothing of delicate materials, — an adornment not altering its essences, but enhancing its effect: this we call the work of the fancy. An exquisite delicacy in appropriating fitting accessories is as much the characteristic excellence of a fanciful mind, as the possession of large, simple, bold ideas is of an imaginative one. The last is immediate: the first comes minute by minute. The distinction is like what one fancies between sculpture and painting. If we look at a delicate statue, — a Venus or Juno, — it does not suggest any slow elaborate process by which its expression was chiseled and its limbs refined; it seems a simple fact: we look, and require no account of it: it exists. The greatest painting suggests not only a creative act but a decorative process: day by day there was something new; we could watch the tints laid on, the dresses tinged, the perspective growing and growing. There is something statuesque about the imagination; there is the gradual complexity of painting in the most exquisite productions of the fancy. When we speak of this distinction, we seem almost to be speaking of the distinction between ancient and modern literature. The characteristic of

Digitized by Google

the classical literature is the simplicity with which the imagination appears in it; that of modern literature is the profusion with which the most various adornments of the accessory fancy are thrown and lavished upon it. Perhaps nowhere is this more conspicuous than in the modern treatment of antique subjects. One of the most essentially modern of recent poets, Keats, has an "Ode on a Grecian Urn"; it begins:—

> "Thou still unravished bride of quietness!
> Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,
> Sylvan historian! who canst thus express
> A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
> What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape
> Of deities or mortals, or of both,
> In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
> What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
> What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
> What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?"

No ancient poet would have dreamed of writing thus: there would have been no indistinct shadowy warmth, no breath of surrounding beauty; his delineation would have been cold, distinct, chiseled like the urn itself. The use which such a poet as Keats makes of ancient mythology is exactly similar. He owes his fame to the inexplicable art with which he has breathed a soft tint over the marble forms of gods and goddesses, enhancing their beauty without impairing their chasteness. The naked kind of imagination is not peculiar to a mythological age: the growth of civilization, at least in Greece, rather increased than diminished the imaginative bareness of the poetical art. It seems to attain its height in Sophocles: if we examine any of his greater passages, a principal beauty is their reserved simplicity. A modern reader almost necessarily uses them as materials for fancy: we are too used to little circumstance to be able to do without it. Take the passage in which Œdipus contrasts the conduct of his sons with that of his daughters:—

Digitized by Google

ὦ πάντ' ἐκείνῳ τοῖς ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ νόμοις
φύσιν κατεικασθέντε καὶ βίου τροφάς.
ἐκεῖ γὰρ οἱ μὲν ἄρσενες κατὰ στέγας
θακοῦσιν ἱστουργοῦντες, αἱ δὲ σύννομοι
τἄξω βίου τροφεῖα πορσύνουσ' ἀεί.
σφῷν δ', ὦ τέκν', οὓς μὲν εἰκὸς ἦν πονεῖν τάδε,
κατ' οἶκον οἰκουροῦσιν ὥστε παρθένοι,
σφὼ δ' ἀντ' ἐκείνων τἀμὰ δυστήνου κακὰ
ὑπερπονεῖτον. ἡ μέν ἐξ ὅτου νέας
τροφῆς ἔληξε καὶ κατίσχυσεν δέμας,
ἀεὶ μεθ' ἡμῶν δύσμορος πλανωμένη
γερονταγωγεῖ, πολλὰ μὲν κατ' ἀγρίαν
ὕλην ἄσιτος νηλίπους τ' ἀλωμένη,
πολλοῖσι δ' ὄμβροις ἠλίου τε καύμασι
μοχθοῦσα τλήμων, δεύτερ' ἡγεῖται τὰ τῆς
αἴκοι διαίτης, εἰ πατὴρ τροφὴν ἔχοι.*

What a contrast to the ravings of Lear! What a world of detail Shakespeare would have put into the passage! what talk of "sulphurous and thought-executing fires," "simulars of virtue." "pent-up guilts," and "the thick rotundity of the world"!† Decorum is the principal thing in Sophocles. The conception of Œdipus is not

> "Crowned with rank fumiter and furrow weeds,
> With harlocks, hemlock, nettle, cuckoo-flowers."‡

There are no "idle weeds" among the "sustaining corn."§ The conception of Lear is that of an old

* "Œdipus at Colonos," lines 337-352:—

> "Oh, they! in habits and in soul at once
> Shaped to the ways of Egypt,—where the men
> Sit by the fireside weaving, and their wives
> Toil in the field to furnish bread for both.
> So they whose duty was to suffer thus
> For you, my daughters, keep like girls at home,
> While in their stead you bear a wretch's woes.
> She here, since childhood's ways she left behind
> And gained a woman's vigor, ever near,
> Ill-fated, guides the old man's wandering feet,
> Famished and barefoot often, straying still
> Day after day the savage forest through,
> Scorched by the sun and drenched by many a storm,
> In patient toil her very household's wants
> Neglected so her father may be fed."

† "King Lear," iii. 2. ‡ Ibid., iv. 4. § Ibid.

Digitized by Google

gnarled oak, gaunt and quivering in the stormy sky, with old leaves and withered branches tossing in the air, and all the complex growth of a hundred years creaking and nodding to its fall: that of Œdipus is the peak of Teneriffe, as we fancied it in our childhood, by itself and snowy, above among the stormy clouds, heedless of the angry winds and the desolate waves, — single, ascending, and alone. Or, to change the metaphor to one derived from an art where the same qualities of mind have produced kindred effects, ancient poetry is like a Grecian temple, with pure form and rising columns, — created, one fancies, by a single effort of an originative nature; modern literature seems to have sprung from the involved brain of a Gothic architect, and resembles a huge cathedral, the work of the perpetual industry of centuries, — complicated and infinite in details, but by their choice and elaboration producing an effect of unity which is not inferior to that of the other, and is heightened by the multiplicity through which it is conveyed. And it is this warmth of circumstance, this profusion of interesting detail, which has caused the name "romantic" to be perseveringly applied to modern literature.

We need only to open Shelley to show how essentially classical in its highest efforts his art is. Indeed, although nothing can be further removed from the staple topics of the classical writers than the abstract lyric, yet their treatment is nearly essential to it. We have said its sphere is in what the Germans call the "unconditioned," — in the unknown, immeasurable, and untrodden; it follows from this that we cannot know much about it. We cannot know detail in tracts we have never visited: the infinite has no form, the immeasurable no outline; that which is common to all worlds is simple: there is therefore no scope for the accessory fancy. With a single soaring effort, imagination may reach her end: if she fail, no fancy can help her; if she succeed,

Digitized by Google

there will be no petty accumulations of insensible circumstance in a region far above all things. Shelley's excellence in the abstract lyric is almost another phrase for the simplicity of his impulsive imagination. He shows it on other subjects also. We have spoken of his bare treatment of the ancient mythology. It is the same with his treatment of nature: in the description of the celestial regions quoted before, — one of the most characteristic passages in his writings, — the details are few, the air thin, the lights distinct. We are conscious of an essential difference if we compare the "Ode to a Nightingale," in Keats, — for instance, such verses as —

"I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs;
But, in embalmèd darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild:
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast-fading violets covered up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

"Darkling I listen; and for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Called him soft names in many a musèd rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath:
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain,—
To thy high requiem become a sod,"—

with the conclusion of the ode "To a Skylark":—

"Yet if we could scorn
Hate and pride and fear;
If we were things born
Not to shed a tear,—
I know not how thy joy we ever should come near.

Digitized by Google

"Better than all measures
Of delightful sound,
Better than all treasures
That in books are found,
Thy skill to poet were, thou scorner of the ground!

"Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know;
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow,
The world should listen then, as I am listening now."

We can hear that the poetry of Keats is a rich, composite, voluptuous harmony; that of Shelley a clear single ring of penetrating melody.

Of course, however, this criticism requires limitation: there is an obvious sense in which Shelley is a fanciful as contradistinguished from an imaginative poet. These words, being invented for the popular expression of differences which can be remarked without narrow inspection, are apt to mislead us when we apply them to the exact results of a near and critical analysis. Besides the use of the word "fancy" to denote the power which adorns and amplifies the product of the primitive imagination, we also employ it to denote the weaker exercise of the faculty which itself creates those elementary products. We use the word "imaginative" only for strong, vast, imposing, interesting conceptions; we use the word "fanciful" when we have to speak of smaller and weaker creations, which amaze us less at the moment and affect us more slightly afterwards. Of course, metaphysically speaking, it is not likely that there will be found to be any distinction: the faculty which creates the most attractive ideas is doubtless the same as that which creates the less attractive. Common language marks the distinction, because common people are impressed by the contrast between what affects them much and what affects them little; but it is no evidence of the entire difference of the latent agencies. Speech, as usual, refers to sensations and not to occult causes. Of fancies of this sort Shelley

Digitized by Google

is full: whole poems—as the "Witch of Atlas"—are composed of nothing else. Living a good deal in and writing a great deal about the abstract world, it was inevitable that he should often deal in fine subtleties, affecting very little the concrete hearts of real men. Many pages of his are in consequence nearly unintelligible, even to good critics of common poetry. The air is too rarefied for hardy and healthy lungs: these like, as Lord Bacon expressed it, to "work upon stuff."* From his habitual choice of slight and airy subjects, Shelley may be called a fanciful as opposed to an imaginative poet; from his bare delineations of great objects, his keen expression of distinct impulses, he should be termed an imaginative rather than a fanciful one.

Some of this odd combination of qualities Shelley doubtless owed to the structure of his senses. By one of those singular results which constantly meet us in metaphysical inquiry, the imagination and fancy are singularly influenced by the bodily sensibility. One might have fancied that the faculty by which the soul soars into the infinite, and sees what it cannot see with the eye of the body, would have been peculiarly independent of that body; but the reverse is the case,—vividness of sensation seems required to awaken, delicacy to define, copiousness to enrich, the visionary faculty. A large experience proves that a being who is blind to this world will be blind to the other; that a coarse expectation of what is not seen will follow from a coarse perception of what is seen. Shelley's sensibility was vivid but peculiar. Hazlitt used to say "he had seen him, and did not like his looks:"† he had the thin keen excitement of the fanatic student, not the broad natural energy which Hazlitt expected from a poet. The diffused life of genial enjoyment which was common to Scott and to Shakespeare was quite out of his way; like Mr. Emerson, he would have wondered

* See note to page 226, Vol. iii.

† A "made" quotation from P. G. Patmore's "My Friends and Acquaintances," sub-head "Opinions and Critical Estimates."

Digitized by Google

they could be content with a "mean and jocular human life in his poetry. He was an abstract student, anxious about deep philosophies; and he had not that settled, contemplative, allotted acquaintance with external nature which is so curious in Milton, the greatest of studious poets. The exact opposite, however, to Shelley, in the nature of his sensibility, is Keats. That great poet used to pepper his tongue, "to enjoy in all its grandeur the cool flavor of delicious claret:" when you know it, you seem to read it in his poetry, — there is the same luxurious sentiment, the same poise on fine sensation. Shelley was the reverse of this: he was a water-drinker; his verse runs quick and chill, like a pure crystal stream. The sensibility of Keats was attracted too by the spectacle of the universe: he could not keep his eye from seeing or his ears from hearing the glories of it; all the beautiful objects of nature reappear by name in his poetry. On the other hand, the abstract idea of beauty is forever celebrated in Shelley; it haunted his soul: but it was independent of special things, — it was the general surface of beauty which lies upon all things. It was the smile of the universe and the expression of the world: it was not the vision of a land of corn and wine. The nerves of Shelley quivered at the idea of loveliness, but no coarse sensation obtruded particular objects upon him; he was left to himself with books and reflection.

So far, indeed, from Shelley having a peculiar tendency to dwell on and prolong the sensation of pleasure, he has a perverse tendency to draw out into lingering keenness the torture of agony. Of his common recurrence to the dizzy pain of mania we have formerly spoken; but this is not the only pain. The nightshade is commoner in his poems than the daisy. The nerve is ever laid bare; as often as it touches the open air of the real world, it quivers

* "Our life . . . is common and mean." — "Man the Reformer."

Digitized by Google

with subtle pain. The high intellectual impulses which animated him are too incorporeal for human nature: they begin in buoyant joy, they end in eager suffering.

In style, said Mr. Wordsworth, — in workmanship, we think his expression was, — Shelley is one of the best of us. This too, we think, was the second of the peculiarities to which Lord Macaulay referred when he said that Shelley had, more than any recent poet, some of the qualities of the great old masters. The peculiarity of his style is its intellectuality; and this strikes us the more from its contrast with his impulsiveness. He had something of this in life: hurried away by sudden desires as he was in his choice of ends, we are struck with a certain comparative measure and adjustment in his choice of means. So in his writings: over the most intense excitement, the grandest objects, the keenest agony, the most buoyant joy, he throws an air of subtle mind. His language is minutely and acutely searching; at the dizziest height of meaning the keenness of the words is greatest. As in mania, so in his descriptions of it, the acuteness of the mind seems to survive the mind itself. It was from Plato and Sophocles, doubtless, that he gained the last perfection in preserving the accuracy of the intellect when treating of the objects of the imagination; but in its essence it was a peculiarity of his own nature. As it was the instinct of Byron to give in glaring words the gross phenomena of evident objects, so it was that of Shelley to refine the most inscrutable with the curious nicety of an attenuating metaphysician; in the wildest of ecstasies his self-anatomizing intellect is equal to itself.

There is much more which might be said, and which ought to be said, of Shelley; but our limits are reached. We have not attempted a complete criticism: we have only aimed to show how some of the peculiarities of his works and life may be traced to the peculiarity of his nature.

Digitized by Google

BÉRANGER. *

(1857.)

THE invention of books has at least one great advantage: it has half abolished one of the worst consequences of the diversity of languages. Literature enables nations to understand one another; oral intercourse hardly does this. In English a distinguished foreigner says not what he thinks, but what he can. There is a certain intimate essence of national meaning which is as untranslatable as good poetry. Dry thoughts are cosmopolitan; but the delicate associations of language which express character, the traits of speech which mark the man, differ in every tongue, so that there are not even cumbrous circumlocutions that are equivalent in another. National character is a deep thing,—a shy thing; you cannot exhibit much of it to people who have a difficulty in understanding your language: you are in strange society, and you feel you will not be understood.

"Let an English gentleman," writes Mr. Thackeray, "who has dwelt two, four, or ten years in Paris, say, at the end of any given period, how much he knows of French society, how many French houses he has entered, and how many French friends he has made? Intimacy there is none; we see but the outsides of the people. Year by year we live in France, and grow gray and see no

* Œuvres complètes de C.-J. de Béranger. Nouvelle édition revue par l'Auteur, contenant les Dix Chansons nouvelles, le facsimile d'une Lettre de Béranger; illustrée de cinquante-deux gravures sur acier, d'après Charlet, D'Aubigny, Johannot, Grenier, De Lemud, Pauquet, Penguilly, Raffet, Sandoz, exécutées par les artistes les plus distingués, et d'un beau portrait d'après nature par Sandoz. 2 vols. 8vo. 1855.

Digitized by Google

more. We play *écarté* with Monsieur de Trêfle every night; but what do we know of the heart of the man — of the inward ways, thoughts, and customs of Trêfle? We have danced with Countess Flicflac, Tuesdays and Thursdays, ever since the peace; and how far are we advanced in her acquaintance since we first twirled her round a room? We know her velvet gown and her diamonds; we know her smiles, and her simpers, and her rouge: but the real, rougeless, *intime* Flicflac we know not."*

Even if our words did not stutter (as they do stutter) on our tongue, she would not tell us what she is. Literature has half mended this. Books are exportable; the essence of national character lies flat on a printed page. Men of genius with the impulses of solitude produce works of art, whose words can be read and reread and partially taken in by foreigners to whom they could never be uttered, the very thought of whose unsympathizing faces would freeze them on the surface of the mind.

Alexander Smith has accused poetical reviewers of beginning as far as possible from their subject. It may seem to some, though it is not so really, that we are exemplifying this saying in commencing as we have commenced an article on Béranger.

There are two kinds of poetry, which one may call poems of this world and poems not of this world. We see a certain society on the earth, held together by certain relations, performing certain acts, exhibiting certain phenomena, calling forth certain emotions. The millions of human beings who compose it have their various thoughts, feelings, and desires. They hate, act, and live. The social bond presses them closely together; and from their proximity new sentiments arise, which are half superficial and do not touch the inmost soul, but which nevertheless are unspeakably important in the actual constitution of

* We have been obliged to abridge the above extract, and in so doing have left out the humor of it.— B. [From the "Paris Sketch Book"; condensed from the section "On Some French Fashionable Novels."— Ed.]

Digitized by Google

human nature, and work out their effects for good and for evil on the characters of those who are subjected to their influence. These sentiments of the world, as one may speak, differ from the more primitive impulses and emotions of our inner nature as the superficial phenomena of the material universe from what we fancy is its real essence. Passing hues, transient changes have their course before our eyes; a multiplex diorama is forever displayed; underneath it all we fancy — such is the inevitable constitution of our thinking faculty — a primitive immovable essence, which is modified into all the ever-changing phenomena we see, which is the gray granite whereon they lie, the primary substance whose *débris* they all are. Just so from the original and primitive emotions of man, society — the evolving capacity of combined action — brings out desires which seem new, in a sense are new; which have no existence out of the society itself, are colored by its customs at the moment, change with the fashions of the age. Such a principle is what we may call social gayety: the love of combined amusement which all men feel and variously express, and which is to the higher faculties of the soul what a gay running stream is to the everlasting mountain, — a light, altering element which beautifies while it modifies. Poetry does not shrink from expressing such feelings; on the contrary, their renovating cheerfulness blends appropriately with her inspiriting delight. Each age and each form of the stimulating imagination has a fashion of its own. Sir Walter sings in his modernized chivalry:—

"Waken, lords and ladies gay:
On the mountain dawns the day;
All the jolly chase is here,
With hawk and horse and hunting spear!
Hounds are in their couples yelling,
Hawks are whistling, horns are knelling,
Merrily, merrily mingle they,
'Waken, lords and ladies gay!'
. . . . .

Digitized by Google

"Louder, louder chant the lay,
'Waken, lords and ladies gay!'
Tell them youth and mirth and glee
Run a course as well as we.
Time, stern huntsman! who can balk?
Stanch as hound and fleet as hawk:
Think of this, and rise with day,
Gentle lords and ladies gay."

The poet of the people, "vilain et très vilain" sings with the pauper Bohemian:—

"Voir c'est avoir. Allons courir!
Vie errante
Est chose enivrante.
Voir c'est avoir. Allons courir!
Car tout voir c'est tout conquérir.
. . . . . .
"Nous n'avons donc, exempts d'orgueil,
De lois vaines,
De lourdes chaînes;
Nous n'avons donc, exempts d'orgueil,
Ni berceau, ni toit, ni cercueil.

Mais, croyez-en notre gaîté,
Noble ou prêtre,
Valet ou maître;
Mais, croyez-en notre gaîté,
Le bonheur c'est la liberté.

"Oui, croyez-en notre gaîté,
Noble ou prêtre,
Valet ou maître;
Oui, croyez-en notre gaîté,
Le bonheur c'est la liberté."*

The forms of these poems of social amusement are, in truth, as various as the social amusement itself. The variety of the world, singularly various as it everywhere is, is nowhere so various as in that. Men have more ways of amusing themselves than of doing anything else they do. But the essence—the

*"Les Bohémiens." See Appendix.

Digitized by Google

characteristic — of these poems everywhere is, that they express more or less well the lighter desires of human nature; those that have least of unspeakable depth, partake most of what is perishable and earthly, and least of the immortal soul. The objects of these desires are social accidents; excellent perhaps, essential possibly; — so is human nature made, — in one form and variety or another, to the well-being of the soul, yet in themselves transitory, fleeting, and in other moods contemptible. The old saying was, that to endure solitude a man must either be a beast or a god:* it is in the lighter play of social action, in that which is neither animal nor divine, which in its half-way character is so natural to man, that these poems of society, which we have called "poems of amusement," have their place.

This species does not, however, exhaust the whole class. Society gives rise to another sort of poems, differing from this one as contemplation differs from desire. Society may be thought of as an object. The varied scene of men — their hopes, fears, anxieties, maxims, actions — presents a sight more interesting to man than any other which has ever existed, or which can exist; and it may be viewed in all moods of mind, and with the change of inward emotion as the external object seems to change: not that it really does so, but that some sentiments are more favorable to clear-sightedness than others are; and some bring before us one aspect of the subject and fix our attention upon it, others a different one and bind our minds to that likewise. Among the most remarkable of these varied views is the world's view of itself. The world, such as it is, has made up its mind what it is. Childishly deceivable by charlatans on every other subject, — imposed on by pedantry, by new and unfounded science, by ancient and unfounded reputation, a prey to pomposity, overrun with recondite fools, ignorant of all else, — society knows itself. The world knows a man of the world.

* Bacon, Essay on Friendship, quoting from Aristotle's "Politica."

Digitized by Google

A certain tradition pervades it; a *disciplina* of the market-place teaches what the collective society of men has ever been, and what (so long as the nature of man is the same) it cannot and will not cease to be. Literature, the written expression of human nature in every variety, takes up this variety likewise. Ancient literature exhibits it, from obvious causes, in a more simple manner than modern literature can. Those who are brought up in times like the present necessarily hear a different set of opinions, fall in with other words, are under the shadow of a higher creed. In consequence, they cannot have the simple *naïveté* of the old world; they cannot speak with easy equanimity of the fugitiveness of life, the necessity of death, of goodness as a mean, of sin as an extreme. The theory of the universe has ceased to be an open question. Still the spirit of Horace is alive, and as potent as that of any man. His tone is that of prime ministers; his easy philosophy is that of courts and parliaments; you may hear his words where no other foreign words are ever heard. He is but the extreme and perfect type of a whole class of writers, some of whom exist in every literary age, and who give an expression to what we may call the poetry of equanimity,—that is, the world's view of itself; its self-satisfaction, its conviction that you must bear what comes, not hope for much, think *some* evil, never be excited, admire little, and then you will be at peace. This creed does not sound attractive in description. Nothing, it has been said, is so easy as to be "religious on paper"; on the other hand, it is rather difficult to be worldly in speculation: the mind of man, when its daily maxims are put before it, revolts from anything so stupid, so mean, so poor. It requires a consummate art to reconcile men in print to that moderate and insidious philosophy which creeps into all hearts, colors all speech, influences all action. We may not stiffen common-sense into a creed; our very ambition forbids:—

Digitized by Google

"It hears a voice within it tell
Calm's not life's crown, though calm is well:
'Tis all, perhaps, which man acquires,
But 'tis not what our youth desires." *

Still, a great artist may succeed in making "calm" interesting. Equanimity has its place in literature; the poetry of equipoise is possible. Poems of society have thus two divisions: that which we mentioned first, the expression of the feelings which are called out by the accidents of society; next, the harmonized expression of that philosophy of indifference with which the world regards the fortunes of individuals and its own.

We have said that no modern nation can produce literature embodying this kind of cool reflection and delineation as it was once produced. By way of compensation, however, it may be — it no doubt is — easier now to produce the lyrical kind of poems of society, the light expression of its light emotions, than it was in ancient times. Society itself is better. There is something hard in paganism, which is always felt even in the softest traits of the most delicate society in antiquity. The social influence of women in modern times gives an interest, a little pervading excitement, to social events. Civilization, besides, has made comfort possible; it has, at least in part, created a scene in which society can be conducted. Its petty conveniences may or may not be great benefits according to a recondite philosophy: but there can be no doubt that for actual men and women, in actual conversation, it is of the greatest importance that their feet should not be cold; that their eyes and mouths should not be troubled with smoke; that sofas should be good, and attractive chairs many. Modern times have the advantage of the ancient in the scenery of flirtation. The little boy complained that you could not find "drawing-room" in the dictionary. Perhaps even because our reflections are deeper, our inner life less purely pagan, our apparent life is softer and easier. Some have said that one reason why physical

* Matthew Arnold, "Youth and Calm."

Digitized by Google

science made so little progress in ancient times was, that people were in doubt about more interesting things; men must have, it has been alleged, a settled creed as to human life and human hopes, before they will attend to shells and snails and pressure. And whether this be so or not, perhaps a pleasant society is only possible to persons at ease as to what is beyond society. Those only can lie on the grass who fear no volcano underneath, and can bear to look at the blue vault above.

Among modern nations, it is not difficult to say where we should look for success in the art of social poetry. "Wherever," said Mr. Lewes the other day, "the French go, they take what they call their civilization,—that is, a *café* and a theater."* And though this be a trifle severe, yet in its essence its meaning is correct: the French have in some manner or other put their mark on all the externals of European life. The essence of every country remains little affected by their teaching: but in all the superficial embellishments of society they have enjoined the fashion; and the very language in which those embellishments are spoken of shows at once whence they were derived. Something of this is doubtless due to the accidents of a central position and an early and prolonged political influence; but more to a certain neatness of nature, a certain finish of the senses, which enables them more easily than others to touch lightly the light things of society, to see the *comme-il-faut*. "I like," said a good judge, "to hear a Frenchman talk: he strikes a light." On a hundred topics he gives the bright, sharp edge, where others have only a blunt approximation.

Nor is this anticipation disappointed. Reviewers do not advance such theories unless they correspond with known results. For many years the French have not been more celebrated for memoirs which professedly describe a real society than they have been for the light social song which embodies its sentiments and

* Roughly quoted from Lewes's Goethe, Book i., Chap. iii.

Digitized by Google

pours forth its spirit. The principle on which such writings are composed is the taking some incident, —not voluntarily, for the incident doubtless of itself takes a hold on the poet's mind,—and out of that incident developing all which there is in it. A grave form is of course inconsistent with such art. The spirit of such things is half mirthful; a very profound meaning is rarely to be expected: but little incidents are not destitute of meaning, and a delicate touch will delineate it in words. A profound excitement likewise such poems cannot produce; they do not address the passions or the intuitions, the heart or the soul: but a gentle pleasure, half sympathy, half amusement, is that at which they aim. They do not please us equally in all moods of mind: sometimes they seem nothing and nonsense, like society itself. We must not be too active or too inactive, to like them; the tension of mind must not be too great: in our highest moods the littlenesses of life are petty; the mind must not be obtusely passive: light touches will not stimulate a sluggish inaction. This dependence on the mood of mind of the reader makes it dangerous to elucidate this sort of art by quotation; Béranger has, however, the following:—

LAIDEUR ET BEAUTÉ.*

"Sa trop grande beauté m'obsède;
C'est un masque aisément trompeur.
Oui, je voudrais qu'elle fût laide,
Mais laide, laide à faire peur.
Belle ainsi faut-il que je l'aime!
Dieu, reprends ce don éclatant;
Je le demande à l'enfer même:
Qu'elle soit laide et que je l'aime autant.

"A ces mots m'apparaît le diable;
C'est le père de la laideur.
'Rendons-la,' dit-il, 'effroyable
De tes rivaux trompons l'ardeur.

*See Appendix.

Digitized by Google

J'aime assez ces métamorphoses.
Ta belle ici vient en chantant :
Perles, tombez ; fanez-vous, roses.
La voilà laide, et tu l'aimes autant.'

"— 'Laide ! moi ?' dit-elle, étonnée.
Elle s'approche d'un miroir,
Doute d'abord, puis, consternée,
Tombe en un morne désespoir.
'Pour moi seul tu jurais de vivre,'
Lui dis-je, à ses pieds me jetant ;
'A mon seul amour il te livre.
Plus laide encore, je t'aimerais autant.'

"Ses yeux éteints fondent en larmes,
Alors sa douleur m'attendrit :
'Ah ! rendez, rendez-lui ses charmes.'
'— Soit !' répond Satan, qui sourit.
Ainsi que naît la fraîche aurore,
Sa beauté renaît à l'instant.
Elle est, je crois, plus belle encore ;
Elle est plus belle, et moi je l'aime autant.

"Vite au miroir elle s'assure
Qu'on lui rend bien tous ses appas ;
Des pleurs restent sur sa figure,
Qu'elle essuie en grondant tout bas.
Satan s'envole, et la cruelle
Fuit et s'écrie en me quittant :
'Jamais fille que Dieu fit belle
Ne doit aimer qui peut l'aimer autant.'"

And this is even a more characteristic specimen :—

LA MOUCHE.*

"Au bruit de notre gaîté folle,
Au bruit des verres, des chansons,
Quelle mouche murmure et vole,
Et revient quand nous la chassons ? (*bis.*)
C'est quelque dieu, je le soupçonne,
Qu'un peu de bonheur rend jaloux.
Ne souffrons point qu'elle bourdonne, } (*bis.*)
Qu'elle bourdonne autour de nous. }

* See Appendix.

Digitized by Google

"Transformée en mouche hideuse,
Amis, oui, c'est, j'en suis certain,
La Raison, déité grondeuse,
Qu'irrite un si joyeux festin.
L'orage approche, le ciel tonne;
Voilà ce que dit son courroux.
Ne souffrons point qu'elle bourdonne,
Qu'elle bourdonne autour de nous.

"C'est la Raison qui vient me dire:
'A ton âge on vit en reclus.
Ne bois plus tant, cesse de rire,
Cesse d'aimer, ne chante plus!'
Ainsi son beffroi toujours sonne
Aux lueurs des feux les plus doux.
Ne souffrons point qu'elle bourdonne,
Qu'elle bourdonne autour de nous.

"C'est la Raison: gare à Lisette!
Son dard la menace toujours.
Dieux! il perce la collerette:
Le sang coule! accourez, Amours!
Amours, poursuivez la félonne;
Qu'elle expire enfin sous vos coups.
Ne souffrons point qu'elle bourdonne,
Qu'elle bourdonne autour de nous.

"Victoire! amis, elle se noie
Dans l'aï que Lise a versé.
Victoire! et qu'aux mains de la Joie
Le sceptre enfin soit replacé. (*bis.*)
Un souffle ébranle sa couronne;
Une mouche nous troublait tous.
Ne craignons plus qu'elle bourdonne,
Qu'elle bourdonne autour de nous." } (*bis.*)

To make poetry out of a fly is a difficult operation. It used to be said of the Lake school of criticism, in Mr. Wordsworth's early and more rigid days, that there was no such term as "elegant" in its nomenclature. The reason is, that dealing or attempting to deal only with the essential aboriginal principles of human nature, that school had no room and no occasion

Digitized by Google

for those minor contrivances of thought and language which are necessary to express the complex accumulation of little feelings, the secondary growth of human emotion. The underwood of nature is "elegant": the bare ascending forest-tree despises what is so trivial,—it is grave and solemn. To such verses, on the other hand, as have been quoted, "elegance" is essential: the delicate finish of fleeting forms is the only excellence they can have.

The characteristic deficiencies of French literature have no room to show themselves in this class of art. "Though France herself denies," says a recent writer, "yet all other nations with one voice proclaim her inferiority to her rivals in poetry and romance, and in all the other elevated fields of fiction. A French Dante, or Michael Angelo, or Cervantes, or Murillo, or Goethe, or Shakespeare, or Milton, we at once perceive to be a mere anomaly; a supposition which may, indeed, be proposed in terms, but which in reality is inconceivable and impossible." In metaphysics, the reason seems to be that the French character is incapable of being mastered by an unseen idea without being so tyrannized over by it as to be incapable of artistic development. Such a character as Robespierre's may explain what we mean. His entire nature was taken up and absorbed in certain ideas; he had almost a vanity in them; he was of them, and they were of him. But they appear in his mind, in his speeches, in his life, in their driest and barest form; they have no motion, life, or roundness. We are obliged to use many metaphors remotely and with difficulty to indicate the procedure of the imagination. In one of these metaphors we figure an idea of imagination as a living thing, a kind of growing plant, with a peculiar form and ever preserving its identity, but absorbing from the earth and air all kindred, suitable, and (so to say) annexable materials. In a mind such as Robespierre's, in the type of the fanatic mind, there is no such thing. The ideas seem

Digitized by Google

a kind of dry hard capsules, never growing, never enlarging, never uniting. Development is denied them: they cannot expand, or ripen or mellow. Dogma is a dry hard husk; poetry has the soft down of the real fruit. Ideas seize on the fanatic mind just as they do on the poetical; they have the same imperious ruling power. The difference is, that in the one the impelling force is immutable, iron, tyrannical; in the other the rule is expansive, growing, free, taking up from all around it moment by moment whatever is fit, as in the political world a great constitution arises through centuries, with a shape that does not vary, but with movement for its essence and the fluctuation of elements for its vitality. A thin poor mind like Robespierre's seems pressed and hampered by the bony fingers of a skeleton hand; a poet's is expanded and warmed at the same time that it is impelled by a pure life-blood of imagination. The French, as we have said, are hardly capable of this. When great remote ideas seize upon them at all, they become fanatics. The wild, chimerical, revolutionary, mad Frenchman has the stiffest of human minds. He is under the law of his creed; he has not attained to the higher freedom of the impelling imagination. The prosing rhetoric of the French tragedy shows the same defect in another form: the ideas, which should have become living realities, remain as lean abstractions; the characters are speaking officials, jets of attenuated oratory. But exactly on this very account the French mind has a genius for the poetry of society. Unable to remove itself into the higher region of imagined forms, it has the quickest detective insight into the exact relation of surrounding superficial phenomena. There are two ways of putting it: either, being fascinated by the present, they cannot rise to what is not present; or, being by defect of nature unable to rise to what is not present, they are concentrated and absorbed in that which is so. Of course there ought not to be, but there *is*, a world of *bonbons*, of *salons*,

Digitized by Google

of *esprit*. Living in the present, they have the poetry of the present. The English genius is just the opposite. Our cumbrous intellect has no call to light artificialities. We do not excel in punctuated detail or nicely squared elaboration; it puts us out of patience that others should. A respectable Englishman murmured in the *Café de Paris*, "I wish I had a hunch of mutton." He could not bear the secondary niceties with which he was surrounded. Our art has the same principle. We excel in strong, noble imagination, in solid stuff. Shakespeare is tough work: he has the play of the rising energy, the buoyant freedom of the unbounded mind; but no writer is so destitute of the simplifying dexterities of the manipulating intellect.

It is dangerous for a foreigner to give an opinion on *minutiæ* of style, especially on points affecting the characteristic excellences of national style. The French language is always neat; all French styles somehow seem good. But Béranger appears to have a peculiar neatness. He tells us that all his songs are the production of a painful effort. If so, the reader should be most grateful: *he* suffers no pain. The delicate elaboration of the writer has given a singular currency to the words. Difficult writing is rarely easy reading; it can never be so when the labor is spent in piecing together elements not joined by an insensible touch of imagination. The highest praise is due to a writer whose ideas are more delicately connected by unconscious genius than other men's are, and yet who spends labor and toil in giving the production a yet cunninger finish, a still smoother connection. The characteristic aloofness of the Gothic mind, its tendency to devote itself to what is not present, is represented in composition by a want of care in the pettinesses of style. A certain clumsiness pervades all tongues of German origin. Instead of the language having been sharpened and improved by the constant keenness of attentive minds, it has

Digitized by Google

been habitually used obtusely and crudely. Light, loquacious Gaul has for ages been the contrast. If you take up a pen just used by a good writer, for a moment you seem to write rather well. A language long employed by a delicate and critical society is a treasure of dexterous felicities. It is not, according to the fine expression of Mr. Emerson, "fossil poetry":* it is crystallized *esprit*.

A French critic has praised Béranger for having retained the *refrain*, or burden,—"*la rime de l'air*," as he calls it. Perhaps music is more necessary as an accompaniment to the poetry of society than it is to any other poetry. Without a sensuous reminder, we might forget that it was poetry; especially in a sparkling, glittering, attenuated language, we might be absorbed as in the defined elegances of prose. In half-trivial compositions we easily forget the little central fancy. The music prevents this: it gives oneness to the parts, pieces together the shavings of the intellect, makes audible the flow of imagination.

The poetry of society tends to the poetry of love. All poetry tends that way. By some very subtle links, which no metaphysician has skillfully tracked, the imagination, even in effects and employments which seem remote, is singularly so connected. One smiles to see the feeling recur. Half the poets can scarcely keep away from it: in the high and dry epic you may see the poet return to it. And perhaps this is not unaccountable. The more delicate and stealing the sensuous element, the more the mind is disposed to brood upon it; the more we dwell on it in stillness, the more it influences the wandering, hovering faculty which we term imagination. The first constructive effort of imagination is beyond the limit of consciousness; the faculty works unseen. But we know that it works in a certain soft leisure only; and this in ordinary minds is almost confined to, in the highest is most commonly accompanied by, the subtlest emotion of reverie. So insinuating is that feeling, that no

* Essay on "The Poet."

Digitized by Google

poet is alive to all its influences; so potent is it, that the words of a great poet, in our complex modern time, are rarely ever free from its traces. The phrase "stealing calm," which most naturally and graphically describes the state of soul in which the imagination works, quite equally expresses, it is said, the coming in and continuance of the not uncommon emotion. Passing, however, from such metaphysics, there is no difficulty in believing that the poetry of society will tend to the most romantic part of society, —away from aunts and uncles, antiquaries and wigs, to younger and pleasanter elements. The talk of society does so; probably its literature will do so likewise. There are nevertheless some limiting considerations, which make this tendency less all-powerful than we might expect it to be. In the first place, the poetry of society cannot deal with passion. Its light touch is not competent to express eager, intense emotion. Rather, we should say, the essential nature of the poetry of amusement is inconsistent with those rugged, firm, aboriginal elements which passion brings to the surface. The volcano is inconsistent with careless talk; you cannot comfortably associate with lava. Such songs as those of Burns are the very antithesis to the levity of society. A certain explicitness pervades them:—

> "Come, let me take thee to my breast,
> And pledge we ne'er shall sunder;
> And I shall spurn as vilest dust
> The warld's wealth and grandeur."

There is a story of his having addressed a lady in society, some time after he came to Edinburgh, in this direct style, and being offended that she took notice of it. The verses were in English, and were not intended to mean anything particular, only to be an elegant attention; but you might as well ask a young lady to take brandy with you as compliment her in this intense manner. The eager peasant-poet

Digitized by Google

was at fault in the polished refinements of the half-feeling drawing-room. Again, the poetry of society can scarcely deal with affection. No poetry, except in hints and for moments, perhaps ever can. You might as well tell secrets to the town-crier. The essence of poetry somehow is publicity. It is very odd when one reads many of the sentiments which are expressed there, — the brooding thought, the delicate feeling, the high conception. What is the use of telling these to the mass of men? Will the grocer feel them? Will the greasy butcher in the blue coat feel them? Are there not some emphatic remarks by Lord Byron on Mr. Saunders ("the d—d salt-fish seller" of Venice),* who could not appreciate "Don Juan"? Nevertheless, for some subtle reason or other, poets do crave, almost more than other men, the public approbation. To have a work of art in your imagination, and that no one else should know of it, is a great pain. But even this craving has its limits. Art can only deal with the universal. Characters, sentiments, actions must be described in what in the old language might be called their conceptual shape. There must always be an idea in them. If one compáres a great character in fiction, say that of Hamlet, with a well-known character in life, we are struck almost at once by the typical and representative nature of the former. We seem to have a more *summary* conception of it, if the phrase may be allowed, than we have of the people we know best in reality. Indeed, our notion of the fictitious character rather resembles a notion of actual persons of whom we know a little, and but a little, — of a public man, suppose, of whom from his speeches and writings we know something, but with whom we never exchanged a word. We generalize a few traits; we do what the historian will have to do hereafter, — we *make* a man, so to speak, resembling the real one, but more defined, more simple and comprehensible. The objects on which affection turns are exactly the opposite. In their essence they are

* Moore's Byron, Vol. ii., page 187 (N. Y. Ed. 1855).

Digitized by Google

individual, peculiar. Perhaps they become known under a kind of confidence; but even if not, nature has hallowed the details of near life by an inevitable secrecy. You cannot expect other persons to feel them; you cannot tell your own intellect what they are. An individuality lurks in our nature. Each soul (as the divines speak) clings to each soul. Poetry is impossible on such points as these: they seem too sacred, too essential. The most that it can do is, by hints and little marks in the interstices of a universalized delineation, to suggest that there is something more than what is stated, and more inward and potent than what is stated. Affection as a settled subject is incompatible with art. And thus the poetry of society is limited on its romantic side in two ways: first by the infinite, intense nature of passion, which forces the voice of art beyond the social tone; and by the confidential, incomprehensible nature of affection, which will not bear to be developed for the public by the fancy in any way.

Being so bounded within the ordinary sphere of their art, poets of this world have contrived or found a substitute. In every country there is a society which is no society. The French, which is the most worldly of literatures, has devoted itself to the delineation of this outside world. There is no form, comic or serious, dramatic or lyrical, in which the subject has not been treated. The burden is:—

"Lisette, ma Lisette,
Tu m'as trompé toujours;
Mais vive la grisette!
Je veux, Lisette,
Boire à nos amours."*

*"Les Infidélités de Lisette":—

"Lisette, my Lisette,
Though you've tricked me for aye,
Long live the grisette!
Here's our loves, Lisette—
I drink to your way."

Digitized by Google

There is obviously no need of affection in *this* society. The whole plot of the notorious novel "La Dame aux Camélias"—and a very remarkable one it is—is founded on the incongruity of real feeling with this world, and the singular and inappropriate consequences which result if by any rare chance it does appear there. Passion is almost, *a fortiori*, out of the question. The depths of human nature have nothing to do with this life. On this account perhaps it is that it harmonizes so little with the English literature and character. An Englishman can scarcely live on the surface: his passions are too strong, his power of *finesse* too little. Accordingly, since Defoe, who treated the subject with a coarse matter-of-factness, there has been nothing in our literature of this kind,—nothing, at least, professedly devoted to it. How far this is due to real excellence, how far to the *bourgeois* and not very outspoken temper of our recent writers, we need not in this place discuss. There is no occasion to quote in this country the early poetry of Béranger, at least not the sentimental part of it. We may take, in preference, one of his poems written in old, or rather in middle age:—

CINQUANTE ANS.*

"Pourquoi ces fleurs? est-ce ma fête?
Non: ce bouquet vient m'annoncer
Qu'un demi-siècle sur ma tête
Achève aujourd'hui de passer.
Oh! combien nos jours sont rapides!
Oh! combien j'ai perdu d'instants!
Oh! combien je me sens de rides!
Hélas! hélas! j'ai cinquante ans.

"A cet âge, tout nous échappe;
Le fruit meurt sur l'arbre jauni.
Mais à ma porte quelqu'un frappe;
N'ouvrons point: mon rôle est fini.
C'est, je gage, un docteur qui jette
Sa carte, où s'est logé le Temps.

* See Appendix.

Digitized by Google

Jadis, j'aurais dit : c'est Lisette.
Hélas ! hélas ! j'ai cinquante ans.

"En maux cuisants vieillesse abonde :
C'est la goutte qui nous meurtrit ;
La cécité, prison profonde ;
La surdité, dont chacun rit.
Puis la raison, lampe qui baisse,
N'a plus que des feux tremblotants.
Enfants, honorez la vieillesse !
Hélas ! hélas ! j'ai cinquante ans !

"Ciel ! j'entends la Mort, qui, joyeuse,
Arrive en se frottant les mains.
A ma porte la fossoyeuse
Frappe ; adieu, messieurs les humains !
En bas, guerre, famine et peste ;
En haut, plus d'astres éclatants.
Ouvrons, tandis que Dieu me reste.
Hélas ! hélas ! j'ai cinquante ans.

"Mais non : c'est vous ! vous, jeune amie,
Sœur de charité dés amours !
Vous tirez mon âme endormie
Du cauchemar des mauvais jours.
Semant les roses de votre âge
Partout, comme fait le printemps,
Parfumez les rêves d'un sage.
Hélas ! hélas ! j'ai cinquante ans."

This is the last scene of the *grisette*, of whom we read in so many songs sparkling with youth and gayety.

A certain intellectuality, however, pervades Béranger's love songs. You seem to feel, to see, not merely the emotion, but the mind in the background viewing that emotion. You are conscious of a considerateness qualifying and contrasting with the effervescing champagne of the feelings described. Desire is rarefied ; sense half becomes an idea. You may trace a similar metamorphosis in the poetry of passion itself. If we contrast such a poem as Shelley's "Epipsychidion" with the natural language of common passion, we see

Digitized by Google

how curiously the intellect can take its share in the dizziness of sense. In the same way, in the lightest poems of Béranger we feel that it may be infused, may interpenetrate the most buoyant effervescence.

Nothing is more odd than to contrast the luxurious and voluptuous nature of much of Béranger's poetry with the circumstances of his life. He never in all his productive time had more than £80 a year; the smallest party of pleasure made him live, he tells us himself, most ascetically for a week: so far from leading the life of a Sybarite, his youth was one of anxiety and privation. A more worldly poet has probably never written, but no poet has shown in life so philosophic an estimate of this world's goods. His origin is very unaristocratic. He was born in August, 1780, at the house of his grandfather, a poor old tailor. Of his mother we hear nothing. His father was a speculative, sanguine man, who never succeeded. His principal education was given him by an aunt, who taught him to read and to write and perhaps generally incited his mind. His school-teaching tells of the philosophy of the revolutionary time. By way of primary school for the town of Péronne, a patriotic member of the National Assembly had founded an *institut d'enfants*. "It offered," we are told, "at once the image of a club and that of a camp: the boys wore a military uniform; at every public event they named deputations, delivered orations, voted addresses; letters were written to the citizen Robespierre and the citizen Tallien." Naturally, amid such great affairs there was no time for mere grammar: they did not teach *Latin*, nor did Béranger ever acquire any knowledge of that language; and he may be said to be destitute of what is in the usual sense called culture. Accordingly, it has in these days been made a matter of wonder by critics whom we may think pedantic, that one so destitute should be able to produce such works. But a far keener judge has pronounced the contrary. Goethe, who certainly did not undervalue the most elaborate

Digitized by Google

and artful cultivation, at once pronounced Béranger to have "a nature most happily endowed, firmly grounded in himself, purely developed from himself, and quite in harmony with himself."* In fact, as these words mean, Béranger, by happiness of nature or self-attention, has that *centrality* of mind which is the really valuable result of colleges and teaching. He puts things together; he refers things to a principle, — rather, they group themselves in his intelligence insensibly round a principle. There is nothing *distrait* in his genius: the man has attained to be himself; a cool oneness, a poised personality pervades him. "The unlearned," it has been said, "judge at random." Béranger is not unlearned in this sense: there is no one who judges more simply, smoothly, and uniformly; his ideas refer to an exact measure. He has mastered what comes before him: and though doubtless unacquainted with foreign and incongruous literatures, he has mastered his own literature, which was shaped by kindred persons and has been the expression of analogous natures; and this has helped him in expressing himself.

In the same way, his poor youth and boyhood have given a reality to his productions. He seems to have had this in mind in praising "the practical education which I have received." He was bred a printer; and the highest post he attained was a clerkship at the university, worth, as has been said, £80 per annum. Accordingly, he has everywhere a sympathy with the common people, an unsought familiarity with them and their life. Sybarite poetry commonly wants this. The aristocratic nature is superficial: it relates to a life protected from simple wants, depending on luxurious artifices. "Mamma," said the simple-minded nobleman, "when poor people have no bread, why do not they eat buns? they are much better."† An over-perfumed softness pervades the poetry of society. You see this in the songs of Moore, the best of

* "Conversations with Eckermann and Soret," May 4, 1830.

† Usually told of Marie Antoinette, *in re* the starving populace. — ED.

Digitized by Google

the sort we have: all is beautiful, soft, half-sincere. There is a little falsetto in the tone; everything reminds you of the drawing-room and the pianoforte: and not only so, — for all poetry of society must in a measure do this, — but it seems fit for no other scene. "Naturalness" is the last word of praise that would be suitable; in the scented air we forget that there is a *pavé* and a multitude. Perhaps France is, of all countries which have ever existed, the one in which we might seek an exception from this luxurious limitation: a certain *égalité* may pervade its art as its society. There is no such difference as with us between the shoeblack and the gentleman; a certain refinement is very common, an extreme refinement possibly rare. Béranger was able to write his poems in poverty: they are popular with the poor.

A success even greater than what we have described as having been achieved by Béranger in the first class of the poems of society, that of amusement, has been attained by him in the second class, expressive of epicurean speculation. Perhaps it is one of his characteristics that the two are forever running one into another: there is animation in his thinking, there is meaning in his gayety. It requires no elaborate explanation to make evident the connection between skepticism and luxuriousness: every one thinks of the Sadducee as in cool halls and soft robes; no one supposes that the Sybarite believes. Pain not only purifies the mind, but deepens the nature. A simple, happy life is animal; it is pleasant, and it perishes. All writers who have devoted themselves to the explanation of this world's view of itself are necessarily in a certain measure Sadducees. The world is Sadducee itself: it cannot be anything else without recognizing a higher creed, a more binding law, a more solemn reality, — without ceasing to be the world. Equanimity is incredulous; impartiality does not care; an indifferent politeness is skeptical. Though not a single speculative opinion is expressed, we may feel this in "Roger Bontemps":

Digitized by Google

ROGER BONTEMPS.*

"Aux gens atrabilaires
Pour exemple donné,
En un temps de misères
Roger Bontemps est né.
Vivre obscur à sa guise,
Narguer les mécontents:
Eh gai! c'est la devise
Du gros Roger Bontemps.

"Du chapeau de son père
Coiffé dans les grands jours,
De roses ou de lierre
Le rajeunir toujours;
Mettre un manteau de bure,
Vieil ami de vingt ans:
Eh gai! c'est la parure
Du gros Roger Bontemps.

"Posséder dans sa hutte
Une table, un vieux lit,
Des cartes, une flûte,
Un broc que Dieu remplit,
Un portrait de maîtresse,
Un coffre et rien dedans:
Eh gai! c'est la richesse
Du gros Roger Bontemps.

"Aux enfans de la ville
Montrer de petits jeux;
Etre un faiseur habile
De contes graveleux;
Ne parler que de danse
Et d'almanachs chantants:
Eh gai! c'est la science
Du gros Roger Bontemps.

"Faute de vin d'élite,
Sabler ceux du canton;
Préférer Marguerite
Aux dames du grand ton;

*See Appendix.

Digitized by Google

De joie et de tendresse
Remplir tous ses instants :
Eh gai ! c'est la sagesse
Du gros Roger Bontemps.

"Dire au Ciel, 'Je me fie,
Mon Père, à ta bonté ;
De ma philosophie
Pardonne la gaîté ;
Que ma saison dernière
Soit encore un printemps ;'
Eh gai ! c'est la prière
Du gros Roger Bontemps.

"Vous, pauvre pleins d'envie,
Vous, riches désireux,
Vous, dont le char dévie
Aprés un cours heureux ;
Vous, qui perdez peut-être
Des titres éclatants,—
Eh gai ! prenez pour maître
Le gros Roger Bontemps."

At the same time, in Béranger the skepticism is not extreme. The skeleton is not paraded. That the world is a passing show, a painted scene, is admitted; you seem to know that it is all acting and rouge and illusion : still, the pleasantness of the acting is dwelt on, the rouge is never rubbed off, the dream runs lightly and easily. No nightmare haunts you, you have no uneasy sense that you are about to awaken. Persons who require a sense of reality may complain : pain is perhaps necessary to sharpen their nerves, a tough effort to harden their consciousness; but if you pass by this objection of the threshold, if you admit the possibility of a superficial and fleeting world, you will not find a better one than Béranger's world. Suppose all the world were a restaurant, his is a good restaurant; admit that life is an effervescing champagne, his is the best for the moment.

In several respects Béranger contrasts with Horace, the poet whom in general he most resembles.

Digitized by Google

The song of "Roger Bontemps" suggests one of the most obvious differences: it is essentially democratic. As we have said before, Béranger is the poet of the people: he himself says, "Le peuple c'est ma muse." Throughout Horace's writings, however much he may speak, and speak justly, of the simplicity of his tastes, you are always conscious that his position is exceptional. Everybody cannot be the friend of Mæcenas; every cheerful man of the world cannot see the springs of the great world. The intellect of most self-indulgent men must satisfy itself with small indulgences. Without a hard ascent you can rarely see a great view. Horace had the almost unequaled felicity of watching the characters and thoughts and tendencies of the governors of the world, the nicest manipulation of the most ingenious statesmen, the inner tastes and predilections which are the origin of the most important transactions; and yet had the ease and pleasantness of the common and effortless life. So rare a fortune cannot be a general model; the gospel of epicureanism must not ask a close imitation of one who had such very special advantages. Béranger gives the acceptors of that creed a commoner type. Out of nothing but the most ordinary advantages—the garret, the almost empty purse, the not over-attired *grisette*—he has given them a model of the sparkling and quick existence for which their fancy is longing. You cannot imagine commoner materials. In another respect Horace and Béranger are remarkably contrasted: Béranger, skeptical and indifferent as he is, has a faith in and zeal for liberty. It seems odd that he should care for that sort of thing; but he does care for it. Horace probably had a little personal shame attaching to such ideas. No regimental officer of our own time can have "joined" in a state of more crass ignorance than did the stout little student from Athens in all probability join the army of Brutus; the legionaries must have taken the measure of him, as the sergeants of our living friends.

Digitized by Google

Anyhow, he was not partial to such reflections: zeal for political institutions is quite as foreign to him as any other zeal. A certain hope in the future is characteristic of Béranger: —

> "Qui découvrit un nouveau monde?
> Un fou qu'on raillait en tout lieu."*

Modern faith colors even bystanding skepticism. Though probably with no very accurate ideas of the nature of liberty, Béranger believes that it is a great good, and that France will have it.

The point in which Béranger most resembles Horace is that which is the most essential in the characters of them both, — their geniality. This is the very essence of the poems of society: it springs in the verses of amusement, it harmonizes with acquiescing sympathy the poems of indifference. And yet few qualities in writing are so rare. A certain malevolence enters into literary ink: the point of the pen pricks. Pope is the very best example of this. With every desire to imitate Horace, he cannot touch any of his subjects, or any kindred subjects, without infusing a bitter ingredient. It is not given to the children of men to be philosophers without envy. Lookers-on can hardly bear the spectacle of the great world. If you watch the carriages rolling down to the House of Lords, you will try to depreciate the House of Lords. Idleness is cynical. Both Béranger and Horace are exceptions to this. Both enjoy the roll of the wheels; both love the glitter of the carriages; neither is angry at the sun. Each knows that he is as happy as he can be, that he is all that he can be, in his contemplative philosophy. In his means of expression for the purpose in hand, the Frenchman has the advantage. The Latin language is clumsy. Light pleasure was an exotic in the Roman world; the terms in which you strive to describe it suit

* "Who brought a new world into light?
A fool derided everywhere." — "Les Fous."

Digitized by Google

rather the shrill camp and droning law court. In English, as we hinted just now, we have this too: business is in our words; a too heavy sense clogs our literature. Even in a writer so apt as Pope at the *finesse* of words, you feel that the solid Gothic roots impede him; it is difficult not to be cumbrous,—the horse may be fleet and light, but the wheels are ponderous and the road goes heavily. Béranger certainly has not this difficulty: nobody ever denied that a Frenchman could be light, that the French language was adapted for levity.

When we ascribed an absence of bitterness and malevolence to Béranger, we were far from meaning that he is not a satirist: every light writer in a measure must be so. Mirth is the imagery of society; and mirth must make fun of somebody. The nineteenth century has not had many shrewder critics than its easy-natured poet. Its intense dullness particularly strikes him. He dreads the dreariness of the Academy; pomposity bores him; formalism tires him; he thinks (and may well think) it dreary to have—

> "Pour grands hommes des journalistes,
> Pour amusement l'opéra."*

But skillful as is the mirth, its spirit is genial and good-natured. "You have been laughing at me constantly, Sydney, for the last seven years," said a friend to the late Canon of St. Paul's, "and yet in all that time you never said a single thing to me that I wished unsaid."† So far as its essential features are concerned, the nineteenth century may say the same of its musical satirist. Perhaps, however, the Bourbons might a little object: clever people have always a *little* malice against the stupid.

There is no more striking example of the degree in which the gospel of good works has penetrated our modern society than that Béranger has talked of

* "For great men, journalists,
For amusement, the opera."

† Dudley; Lady Holland's Memoirs of Sydney Smith, Chap. xi.

Digitized by Google

"utilizing his talent." The epicurean poet considers that he has been a political missionary. Well may others be condemned to the penal servitude of industry, if the lightest and idlest of skillful men boasts of being subjected to it. If Béranger thinks it necessary to think that he has been useful, others may well think so too: let us accept the heavy doctrine of hard labor; there is no other way to heave off the rubbish of this world. The mode in which Béranger is anxious to prove that he made his genius of use, is by diffusing a taste for liberty and expressing an enthusiasm for it; and also, as we suppose, by quizzing those rulers of France who have not shared either the taste or the enthusiasm. Although, however, such may be the idea of the poet himself, posterity will scarcely confirm it. Political satire is the most ephemeral kind of literature. The circumstances to which it applies are local and temporary; the persons to whom it applies die. A very few months will make unintelligible what was at first strikingly plain. Béranger has illustrated this by an admission. There was a delay in publishing the last volume of his poems, many of which relate to the years or months immediately preceding the Revolution of 1830; the delay was not long, as the volume appeared in the first month of 1833, yet he says that many of the songs relate to the passing occurrences of a period "déjà loin de nous." On so shifting a scene as that of French political life, the jests of each act are forgotten with the act itself; the eager interest of each moment withdraws the mind from thinking of or dwelling on anything past. And in all countries, administration is ephemeral; what relates to it is transitory. Satires on its detail are like the jests of a public office · the clerks change, oblivion covers their peculiarities; the point of the joke is forgotten. There are some considerable exceptions to the saying that foreign literary opinion is a "contemporary posterity"; but in

Digitized by Google

relation to satires on transitory transactions it is exactly expressive. No Englishman will now care for many of Béranger's songs which were once in the mouths of all his countrymen, which colored the manners of revolutions, perhaps influenced their course. The fame of a poet may have a reference to politics; but it will be only to the wider species, to those social questions which never die, the elements of that active human nature which is the same age after age. Béranger can hardly hope for this. Even the songs which relate to liberty can hardly hope for this immortality. They have the vagueness which has made French aspirations for freedom futile. So far as they express distinct feeling, their tendency is rather anti-aristocratic than in favor of simple real liberty; and an objection to a mere rank, though a potent, is neither a very agreeable nor a very poetical sentiment. Moreover, when the love of liberty is to be imaginatively expressed, it requires to an Englishman's ear a sound bigger and more trumpet-tongued than the voice of Béranger.

On a deeper view, however, an attentive student will discover a great deal that is most instructive in the political career of the not very business-like poet. His life has been contemporaneous with the course of a great change; and throughout it the view which he has taken of the current events is that which sensible men took at the time, and which a sensible posterity (and these events will from their size attract attention enough to insure their being viewed sensibly) is likely to take. Béranger was present at the taking of the Bastille, but he was then only nine years old; the accuracy of opinion which we are claiming for him did not commence so early. His mature judgment begins with the career of Napoleon; and no one of the thousands who have written on that subject has viewed it perhaps more justly. He had no love for the despotism of the Empire, was alive to the harshness of its administration, did not

Digitized by Google

care too much for its glory, must have felt more than once the social exhaustion. At the same time, no man was penetrated more profoundly, no literary man half so profoundly, with the popular admiration for the genius of the Empire. His own verse has given the truest and most lasting expression of it:—

LES SOUVENIRS DU PEUPLE.*

"On parlera de sa gloire
Sous le chaume bien longtemps.
L'humble toit, dans cinquante ans,
Ne connaîtra plus d'autre histoire.
Là viendront les villageois,
Dire alors à quelque vieille,
'Par des récits d'autrefois,
Mère, abrégez notre veille.
Bien,' dit-on, 'qu'il nous ait nui,
Le peuple encor le révère,
Oui, le révère.
Parlez-nous de lui, grand'mère;
Parlez-nous de lui.' (*bis.*)

"'Mes enfants, dans ce village,
Suivi de rois, il passa.
Voilà bien longtemps de ça:
Je venais d'entrer en ménage.
A pied grimpant le coteau
Où pour voir je m'étais mise,
Il avait petit chapeau
Avec redingote grise.
Près de lui je me troublai;
Il me dit, "Bonjour, ma chère,
Bonjour, ma chère."'—
'Il vous a parlé, grand'mère!
Il vous a parlé!'

"'L'an d'après, moi, pauvre femme,
A Paris étant un jour,
Je le vis avec sa cour:
Il se rendait à Notre-Dame.
Tous les cœurs étaient contents;
On admirait son cortége.

*See Appendix.

Digitized by Google

Chacun disait, "Quel beau temps!
Le ciel toujours le protége."
Son sourire était bien doux;
D'un fils Dieu le rendait père,
Le rendait père.'
'Quel beau jour pour vous, grand'mère!
Quel beau jour pour vous!'

"'Mais, quand la pauvre Champagne
Fut en proie aux étrangers,
Lui, bravant tous les dangers,
Semblait seul tenir la campagne.
Un soir, tout comme aujourd'hui,
J'entends frapper à la porte.
J'ouvre. Bon Dieu! c'était lui,
Suivi d'une faible escorte.
Il s'asseoit où me voilà,
S'écriant, "Oh! quelle guerre!
Oh! quelle guerre!"'—
'Il s'est assis là, grand'mère!
Il s'est assis là!'

"'J'ai faim," dit-il: et bien vite
Je sers piquette et pain bis;
Puis il sèche ses habits,
Même à dormir le feu l'invite.
Au réveil, voyant mes pleurs,
Il me dit, "Bonne espérance!
Je cours, de tous ses malheurs
Sous Paris venger la France."
Il part; et comme un trésor
J'ai depuis gardé son verre,
Gardé son verre.'—
'Vous l'avez encor, grand'mère!
Vous l'avez encor!'

"'Le voici. Mais à sa perte
Le héros fut entraîné.
Lui, qu'un pape a couronné,
Est mort dans une île déserte.
Longtemps aucun ne l'a cru;
On disait, "Il va paraître:
Par mer il est accouru;
L'étranger va voir son maître."

Digitized by Google

Quand d'erreur on nous tira,
Ma douleur fut bien amère!
Fut bien amère!'—
'Dieu vous bénira, grand'mère;
Dieu vous bénira.'" (*bis.*)

This is a great exception to the transitoriness of political poetry. Such a character as that of Napoleon displayed on so large a stage, so great a genius amid such scenery of action, insures an immortality. "The page of universal history" which he was always coveting, he has attained; and it is a page which, from its singularity and its errors, its shame and its glory, will distract the attention from other pages. No one who has ever had in his mind the idea of Napoleon's character can forget it. Nothing, too, can be more natural than that the French should remember it. His character possessed the primary imagination, the elementary conceiving power, in which they are deficient. So far from being restricted to the poetry of society, he would not have even appreciated it. A certain bareness marks his mind; his style is curt; the imaginative product is left rude; there is the distinct abstraction of the military diagram. The tact of light and passing talk, the detective imagination which is akin to that tact and discovers the quick essence of social things, he never had. In speaking of his power over popular fancies, Béranger has called him "the greatest poet of modern times." No genius can be more unlike his own, and therefore perhaps it is that he admires it so much. During the Hundred Days, Béranger says he was never under the illusion, then not rare, that the Emperor could become a constitutional monarch. The lion, he felt, would not change his skin. After the return of the Bourbons, he says, doubtless with truth, that his "instinct du peuple" told him they could never ally themselves with liberal principles, or unite with that new order of society which, though dating from the Revolution, had acquired in five-and-twenty

Digitized by Google

years a half-prescriptive right. They and their followers came in to *take* possession, and it was impossible they could unite with what *was* in possession. During the whole reign of the hereditary Bourbon dynasty, Béranger was in opposition. Representing the natural sentiments of the new Frenchman, he could not bear the natural tendency of the ruling power to the half-forgotten practices of old France. The legitimate Bourbons were by their position the chieftains of the party advocating their right by birth; they could not be the kings of a people: and the poet of the people was against them. After the genius of Napoleon, all other governing minds would seem tame and contracted; and Charles X. was not a man to diminish the inevitable feeling. Béranger despised him. As the poet warred with the weapons of poetry, the government retorted with the penalties of state. He was turned out of his petty clerkship, he was twice imprisoned: but these things only increased his popularity; and a firm and genial mind, so far from being moved, sang songs at La Force itself. "The Revolution of 1830 was willing to make" his "fortune":

"Je l'ai traitée," he says, "comme une puissance qui peut avoir des caprices auxquels il faut être en mesure de résister. Tous ou presque tous mes amis ont passé au ministère: j'en ai même encore un ou deux qui restent suspendus à ce mât de cocagne. Je me plais à croire qu'ils y sont accrochés par la basque, malgré les efforts qu'ils font pour descendre. J'aurais donc pu avoir part à la distribution des emplois. Malheureusement je n'ai pas l'amour des sinécures, et tout travail obligé m'est devenu insupportable, hors peut-être encore celui d'expéditionnaire. Des médisants ont prétendu que je faisais de la vertu. Fi donc! je faisais de la paresse. Ce défaut m'a tenu lieu de bien des qualités; aussi je le recommande à beaucoup de nos honnêtes gens. Il expose pourtant à de singuliers reproches. C'est à cette paresse si douce, que des censeurs rigides ont attribué l'éloignement où je me suis tenu de ceux de mes honorables amis qui ont eu le malheur d'arriver au pouvoir. Faisant trop d'honneur à ce qu'ils veulent bien appeler ma bonne tête, et oubliant trop combien il y a loin du simple bon sens à la science des grandes affaires, ces censeurs prétendent que mes

Digitized by Google

conseils eussent éclairé plus d'un ministre. A les en croire, tapi derrière le fauteuil de velours de nos hommes d'état, j'aurais conjuré les vents, dissipé les orages, et fait nager la France dans un océan de délices. Nous aurions tous de la liberté à revendre ou plutôt à donner, car nous n'en savons pas bien encore le prix. Eh! messieurs mes deux ou trois amis, qui prenez un chansonnier pour un magicien, on ne vous a donc pas dit que le pouvoir est une cloche qui empêche ceux qui la mettent en branle d'entendre aucun autre son? Sans doute des ministres consultent quelquefois ceux qu'ils ont sous la main: consulter est un moyen de parler de soi qu'on néglige rarement. Mais il ne suffirait pas de consulter de bonne foi des gens qui conseilleraient de même. Il faudrait encore exécuter: ceci est la part du caractère. Les intentions les plus pures, le patriotisme le plus éclairé, ne le donnent pas toujours. Qui n'a vu de hauts personnages quitter un donneur d'avis avec une pensée courageuse, et, l'instant d'après, revenir vers lui, de je ne sais quel lieu de fascination, avec l'embarras d'un démenti donné aux résolutions les plus sages? 'Oh!' disent-ils, 'nous n'y serons plus repris! quelle galère!' Le plus honteux ajoute, 'Je voudrais bien vous voir à ma place!' Quand un ministre dit cela, soyez sûr qu'il n'a plus la tête à lui. Cependant il en est un, mais un seul, qui, sans avoir perdu la tête, a répété souvent ce mot de la meilleure foi du monde; aussi ne l'adressait-il jamais à un ami."*

The statesman alluded to in the last paragraph is Manuel, his intimate friend, from whom he declares he could never have been separated, but whose death prevented his obtaining political honors. Nobody can read the above passage without feeling its tone of political sense. An enthusiasm for, yet half distrust of, the Revolution of July seems as sound a sentiment as could be looked for even in the most sensible contemporary. What he has thought of the present dynasty we do not know. He probably has as little concurred in the silly encomiums of its mere partisans as in the wild execrations of its disappointed enemies. His opinion could not have been either that of the English who *fêted* Louis Napoleon in 1855, or of those who despised him in 1851. The political fortunes of France during the last ten years must have

* Preface to "Chansons." See Appendix.

Digitized by Google

been a painful scene of observation to one who remembered the taking of the Bastile. If there be such a thing as failure in the world, this looks like it.

Although we are very far from thinking that Béranger's claims on posterity are founded on his having utilized his talent in favor of liberty, it is very natural that he should think (or half think) himself that it is so. His power over the multitude must have given him great pleasure: it is something to be able to write mottoes for a revolution,— to write words for people to use, and hear people use those words. The same sort of pleasure which Horace derived from his nearness to the center of great action, Béranger has derived from the power which his thorough sympathy with his countrymen has given him over them. A political satire may be ephemeral from the rapid oblivion of its circumstances; but it is not unnatural that the author, inevitably proud of its effect, may consider it of higher worth than mere verses of society.

This shrewd sense gives a solidity to the verses of Béranger which the social and amusing sort of poetry commonly wants; but nothing can redeem it from the reproach of wanting "*back* thought."* This is inevitable in such literature: as it professes to delineate for us the light essence of a fugitive world, it cannot be expected to dwell on those deep and eternal principles on which that world is based; it ignores them as light talk ignores them. The most opposite thing to the poetry of society is the poetry of inspiration. There exists, of course, a kind of imagination which detects the secrets of the universe; which fills us sometimes with dread, sometimes with hope; which awakens the soul, which makes pure the feelings, which explains nature, reveals what is above nature, chastens "the deep heart of man."† Our senses teach us what the world is; our intuitions, where it is. We see the blue and gold of the world, its lively amusements, its

* Derwent Coleridge on Hartley. † Shelley, "Alastor."

Digitized by Google

gorgeous if superficial splendor, its currents of men; we feel its light spirits, we enjoy its happiness; we enjoy it, and we are puzzled: — What is the object of all this? why do we do all this? what is the universe *for?* Such a book as Béranger's suggests this difficulty in its strongest form: it embodies the essence of all that pleasure-loving, pleasure-giving, unaccountable world in which men spend their lives, — which they are compelled to live in, but which the moment you get out of it seems so odd that you can hardly believe it is real. On this account, as we were saying before, there is no book the impression of which varies so much in different moods of mind. Sometimes no reading is so pleasant; at others you half despise and half hate the idea of it, — it seems to sum up and make clear the littleness of your own nature. Few can bear the theory of their amusements: it is essential to the pride of man to believe that he is industrious. We are irritated at literary laughter, and wroth at printed mirth. We turn angrily away to that higher poetry which gives the outline within which all these light colors are painted. From the capital of levity and its self-amusing crowds, from the elastic *vaudeville* and the grinning actors, from *chansons* and *cafés*, we turn away to the solemn in nature, to the blue overarching sky: the one remains, the many pass;* no number of seasons impairs the bloom of those hues, — they are as soft to-morrow as to-day. The immeasurable depth folds us in. "Eternity," as the original thinker said, "is everlasting." We breathe a deep breath. And perhaps we have higher moments: we comprehend the "unintelligible world"†; "we see into the life of things"‡; we fancy we know whence we come and whither we go; words we have repeated for years have a meaning for the first time; texts of old Scripture seem to apply to *us*. . . . And — and — Mr. Thackeray would say, You come back into the

* Shelley, "Adonais," lii. † Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey." ‡ Ibid.

Digitized by Google

town, and order dinner at a restaurant, and read Béranger once more.

And though this is true; though the author of "Le Dieu des Bonnes Gens" has certainly no claim to be called a profound divine; though we do not find in him any proper expression, scarcely any momentary recognition, of those intuitions which explain in a measure the scheme and idea of things, and form the "back thought" and inner structure of such minds as ours,—his sense and sympathy with the people enable him, perhaps compel him, to delineate those essential conditions which constitute the structure of exterior life, and determine with inevitable certainty the common life of common persons. He has no call to deal with heaven or the universe, but he knows the earth; he is restricted to the boundaries of time, but he understands time. He has extended his delineations beyond what in this country would be considered correct: "Les Cinq Étages" can scarcely be quoted here, but a perhaps higher example of the same kind of art may be so:—

LE VIEUX VAGABOND.*

"Dans ce fossé cessons de vivre;
Je finis vieux, infirme, et las.
Les passants vont dire, 'Il est ivre':
Tant mieux! ils ne me plaindront pas.
J'en vois qui détournent la tête;
D'autres me jettent quelques sous.
Courez vite, allez à la fête:
Vieux vagabond, je puis mourir sans vous.

"Oui, je meurs ici de vieillesse,
Parce qu'on ne meurt pas de faim.
J'espérais voir de ma détresse
L'hôpital adoucir la fin;
Mais tout est plein dans chaque hospice,
Tant le peuple est infortuné.
La rue, hélas! fut ma nourrice:
Vieux vagabond, mourons où je suis né.

* See Appendix.

Digitized by Google

"Aux artisans, dans mon jeune âge,
J'ai dit, 'Qu'on m'enseigne un métier.'—
'Va, nous n'avons pas trop d'ouvrage,'
Répondaient-ils : 'va mendier.'
Riches, qui me disiez, 'Travaille,'
J'eus bien des os de vos repas ;
J'ai bien dormi sur votre paille :
Vieux vagabond, je ne vous maudis pas.

"J'aurais pu voler, moi, pauvre homme ;
Mais non : mieux vaut tendre la main.
Au plus, j'ai dérobé la pomme
Qui mûrit au bord du chemin.
Vingt fois pourtant on me verrouille
Dans les cachots, de par le roi.
De mon seul bien on me dépouille :
Vieux vagabond, le soleil est à moi.

"Le pauvre a-t-il une patrie ?
Que me font vos vins et vos blés,
Votre gloire et votre industrie,
Et vos orateurs assemblés ?
Dans vos murs ouverts à ses armes
Lorsque l'étranger s'engraissait,
Comme un sot j'ai versé des larmes :
Vieux vagabond, sa main me nourrissait.

"Comme un insecte fait pour nuire,
Hommes, que ne m'écrasiez-vous ?
Ah ! plutôt vous deviez m'instruire
A travailler au bien de tous.
Mis à l'abri du vent contraire,
Le ver fût devenu fourmi ;
Je vous aurais chéris en frère :
Vieux vagabond, je meurs votre ennemi."

Pathos in such a song as this enters into poetry : we sympathize with the essential lot of man. Poems of this kind are doubtless rare in Béranger, — his commoner style is lighter and more cheerful ; but no poet who has painted so well the light effervescence of light society can, when he likes, paint so well the

Digitized by Google

solid, stubborn forms with which it is encompassed. The genial, firm sense of a large mind sees and comprehends all of human life which lies within the sphere of sense. He is an epicurean, as all merely sensible men by inevitable consequence are, and as an epicurean he prefers to deal with the superficial and gay forms of life; but he can deal with others when he chooses to be serious. Indeed, there is no melancholy like the melancholy of the epicurean. He is alive to the fixed conditions of earth, but not to that which is above earth. He muses on the temporary, as such; he admits the skeleton, but not the soul. It is wonderful that Béranger is so cheerful as he is.

We may conclude as we began. In all his works — in lyrics of levity, of politics, of worldly reflection — Béranger, if he had not a single object, has attained a uniform result. He has given us an idea of the essential French character, such as we fancy it must be, but can never for ourselves hope to see that it is. We understand the nice tact, the quick intelligence, the gay precision; the essence of the drama we know, the spirit of what we have seen. We know his feeling: —

"J'aime qu'un Russe soit Russe,
Et qu'un Anglais soit Anglais;
Si l'on est Prussien en Prusse,
En France soyons Français."*

He has acted accordingly: he has delineated to us the essential Frenchman.

* "I love to have Russians be Russians,
And Englishmen English all through;
If in Prussia the people are Prussians,
In France let's be Frenchmen too."
— "Le Bon Français."

Digitized by Google

*MR. CLOUGH'S POEMS.**

(1862.)

No one can be more rigid than we are in our rules as to the publication of "remains" and memoirs. It is very natural that the friends of a cultivated man who seemed about to do something, but who died before he did it, should desire to publish to the world the grounds of their faith, and the little symptoms of his immature excellence. But though they act very naturally, they act very unwisely. In the present state of the world there are too many half-excellent people: there is a superfluity of persons who have all the knowledge, all the culture, all the requisite taste,—all the tools, in short, of achievement, but who are deficient in the latent impulse and secret vigor which alone can turn such instruments to account. They have all the outward and visible signs of future success: they want the invisible spirit, which can only be demonstrated by trial and victory. Nothing, therefore, is more tedious or more worthless than the posthumous delineation of the possible successes of one who did not succeed. The dreadful remains of nice young persons which abound among us prove almost nothing as to the future fate of those persons, if they had survived. We can only tell that any one is a man of genius by his having produced some work of genius. Young men must practice themselves in youthful essays; and to some of their friends these may seem works not only of fair promise, but of achieved excellence. The cold world of critics and

* Poems. By Arthur Hugh Clough, sometime Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford. With a Memoir. Macmillan.

Digitized by Google

readers will not, however, think so: that world will understand the distinction between promise and performance, and sees that these laudable *juvenilia* differ from good books as much as legitimate bills of exchange differ from actual cash.

If we did not believe that Mr. Clough's poems, or at least several of them, had real merit, not as promissory germs, but as completed performances, it would not seem to us to be within our province to notice them. Nor, if Mr. Clough were now living among us, would he wish us to do so. The marked peculiarity, and so to say the *flavor* of his mind, was a sort of truthful skepticism, which made him anxious never to overstate his own assurance of anything; which disinclined him to overrate the doings of his friends; and which absolutely compelled him to underrate his own past writings, as well as his capability for future literary success. He could not have borne to have his poems reviewed with "nice remarks" and sentimental epithets of insincere praise. He was equal to his precept:—

"Where are the great, whom thou wouldst wish to praise thee?
Where are the pure, whom thou wouldst choose to love thee?
Where are the brave, to stand supreme above thee,
Whose high commands would cheer, whose chiding raise thee?
Seek, seeker, in thyself; submit to find
In the stones, bread, and life in the blank mind."

To offer petty praise and posthumous compliments to a stoic of this temper is like buying sugar-plums for St. Simeon Stylites. We venture to write an article on Mr. Clough, because we believe that his poems depict an intellect in a state which is always natural "to such a being as man in such a world as the present,"* which is peculiarly natural to us just now; and because we believe that many of these poems are very remarkable for true vigor and artistic excellence, although they certainly have defects and shortcomings, which would have been lessened, if not removed, if their author had lived longer and had written more.

*See note to Vol. ii., page 109.

Digitized by Google

In a certain sense there are two great opinions about everything. There are two about the universe itself. The world as we know it is this: there is a vast, visible, indisputable sphere, of which we never lose the consciousness, of which no one seriously denies the existence, about the most important part of which most people agree tolerably and fairly. On the other hand, there is the invisible world, about which men are not agreed at all: which all but the faintest minority admit to exist somehow and somewhere, but as to the nature or locality of which there is no efficient popular demonstration, no such compulsory argument as will *force* the unwilling conviction of any one disposed to denial. As our minds rise, as our knowledge enlarges, as our wisdom grows, as our instincts deepen, our conviction of this invisible world is daily strengthened, and our estimate of its nature is continually improved. But — and this is the most striking peculiarity of the whole subject — the more we improve; the higher we rise; the nobler we conceive the unseen world which is in us and about us, in which we live and move, — the more unlike that world becomes to the world which we *do* see. The divinities of Olympus were, in a very plain and intelligible sense, part and parcel of this earth: they were better specimens than could be found below, but they belonged to extant species; they were better editions of visible existences; they were like the heroines whom young men imagine after seeing the young ladies of their vicinity, — they were better and handsomer, but they were of the same sort; they had never been seen, but they might have been seen any day. So too of the God with whom the Patriarch wrestled: he might have been wrestled with, even if he was not; he was that sort of person. If we contrast with these the God of whom Christ speaks, — the God who has not been seen at any time, whom no man hath seen or can see, who is infinite in nature, whose ways are past finding out, — the transition is

Digitized by Google

palpable. We have passed from gods,—from an invisible world which is similar to, which is a *natural appendix* to, the world in which we live,—and we have come to believe in an invisible world which is altogether unlike that which we see; which is certainly not opposed to our experience, but is altogether beyond and unlike our experience; which belongs to another set of things altogether; which is, as we speak, transcendental. The "possible" of early barbarism is like the reality of early barbarism; the "maybe," the "great perhaps," of late civilization is most unlike the earth, whether barbaric or civilized.

Two opinions as to the universe naturally result from this fundamental contrast. There are plenty of minds like that of Voltaire, who have simply no sense or perception of the invisible world whatever, who have no ear for religion, who are in the technical sense unconverted, whom no conceivable process could convert without altering what to bystanders and ordinary observers is their identity. They are, as a rule, acute, sensible, discerning, and humane; but the first observation which the most ordinary person would make as to them is, that they are "limited." They understand palpable existence; they elaborate it, and beautify and improve it: but an admiring bystander, who can do none of these things, who can beautify nothing, who if he tried would only make what is ugly uglier, is conscious of a latent superiority, which he can hardly help connecting with his apparent inferiority. We cannot write Voltaire's sentences: we cannot make things as clear as he made them: but we do not much care for our deficiency. Perhaps we think, "Things ought not to be so plain as all that." There is a hidden, secret, unknown side to this universe, which these picturesque painters of the visible, these many-handed manipulators of the palpable, are not aware of, which would spoil their dexterity if it were displayed to them. Sleep-walkers can tread safely on the very edge of a precipice; but

Digitized by Google

those who see cannot. On the other hand, there are those whose minds have not only been converted, but in some sense *inverted.* They are so occupied with the invisible world as to be absorbed in it entirely; they have no true conception of that which stands plainly before them,—they never look coolly at it, and are cross with those who do; they are wrapt up in their own faith as to an unseen existence; they rush upon mankind with "Ah, there it is! there it is!—don't you see it?" and so incur the ridicule of an age.

The best of us try to avoid both fates. We strive, more or less, to "make the best of both worlds." We know that the invisible world cannot be duly discerned, or perfectly appreciated. We know that we see as in a glass darkly; but still we look on the glass. We frame to ourselves some image which we know to be incomplete, which probably is in part untrue, which we try to improve day by day, of which we do not deny the defects,—but which nevertheless is our "all"; which we hope, when the accounts are taken, may be found not utterly *unlike* the unknown reality. This is, as it seems, the best religion for finite beings, living, if we may say so, on the very edge of two dissimilar worlds; on the very line on which the infinite, unfathomable sea surges up, and just where the queer little bay of this world ends. We count the pebbles on the shore, and image to ourselves as best we may the secrets of the great deep.

There are, however, some minds (and of these Mr. Clough's was one) which will not accept what appears to be an intellectual destiny. They struggle against the limitations of mortality, and will not condescend to use the natural and needful aids of human thought. They will not *make their image.* They struggle after an "actual abstract." They feel, and they rightly feel, that every image, every translation, every mode of conception by which the human mind

Digitized by Google

tries to place before itself the divine mind is imperfect, halting, changing. They feel from their own experience that there is no one such mode of representation which will suit their own minds at all times, and they smile with bitterness at the notion that they could contrive an image which will suit all other minds. They could not become fanatics or missionaries, or even common preachers, without forfeiting their natural dignity and foregoing their very essence. To cry in the streets, to uplift their voice in Israel, to be "pained with hot thoughts," to be "preachers of a dream," would reverse their whole cast of mind. It would metamorphose them into something which omits every striking trait for which they were remarked, and which contains every trait for which they were not remarked. On the other hand, it would be quite as opposite to their whole nature to become followers of Voltaire. No one knows more certainly and feels more surely that there is an invisible world than those very persons who decline to make an image or representation of it, who shrink with a nervous horror from every such attempt when it is made by any other. All this inevitably leads to what common, practical people term a "curious" sort of mind. You do not know how to describe these "universal negatives," as they seem to be. They will not fall into place in the ordinary intellectual world anyhow. If you offer them any known religion, they "won't have that"; if you offer them no religion, they will not have that either; if you ask them to accept a new and as yet unrecognized religion, they altogether refuse to do so. They seem not only to believe in an "unknown God," but in a God whom no man can ever know. Mr. Clough has expressed, in a sort of lyric, what may be called their essential religion:—

"O Thou, whose image in the shrine
Of human spirits dwells divine!
Which from that precinct once conveyed,
To be to outer day displayed,

Digitized by Google

Doth vanish, part, and leave behind
Mere blank and void of empty mind,
Which willful fancy seeks in vain
With casual shapes to fill again!

"O Thou, that in our bosom's shrine
Dost dwell, unknown because divine!
I thought to speak; I thought to say,
'The light is here,' 'Behold the way,'
'The voice was thus,' and 'Thus the word,'
And 'Thus I saw,' and 'That I heard':
But from the lips that half essayed,
The imperfect utterance fell unmade.

"O Thou, in that mysterious shrine
Enthroned, as I must say, divine!
I will not frame one thought of what
Thou mayest either be or not.
I will not prate of 'thus' and 'so,'
And be profane with 'yes' and 'no':
Enough that in our soul and heart
Thou, whatso'er Thou mayst be, art."

It was exceedingly natural that Mr. Clough should incline to some such creed as this, with his character and in his circumstances. He had by nature, probably, an exceedingly *real* mind, in the good sense of that expression and the bad sense. The actual visible world, as it was and as he saw it, exercised over him a compulsory influence. The hills among which he had wandered, the cities he had visited, the friends whom he knew,—these were his world. Many minds of the poetic sort easily melt down these palpable facts into some impalpable ether of their own. To such a mind as Shelley's the "solid earth" is an immaterial fact; it is not even a cumbersome difficulty,—it is a preposterous imposture. Whatever may exist, all that *clay* does not exist: it would be too absurd to think so. Common persons can make nothing of this dreaminess; and Mr. Clough, though superficial observers set him down as a dreamer, could not make much either. To him, as to the mass

Digitized by Google

of men, the vulgar, outward world was a primitive fact. "Texas *is* true," as the miser said. Reconcile what you have to say with green peas, for green peas are certain: such was Mr. Clough's idea. He could not dissolve the world into credible ideas and then believe those ideas, as many poets have done. He could not catch up a creed as ordinary men do. He had a *straining,* inquisitive, critical mind; he scrutinized every idea before he took it in; he did not allow the moral forces of life to act as they should; he was not content to gain a belief "by going on living." He said,—

"*Action will furnish belief*,—but will that belief be the true one? This is the point, you know."

He felt the coarse facts of the plain world so thoroughly that he could not readily take in anything which did not seem in accordance with them and like them. And what common idea of the invisible world seems in the least in accordance with them or like them?

A journal writer in one of his poems † has expressed this:—

"Comfort has come to me here in the dreary streets of the city;
Comfort—how do you think?—with a barrel-organ to bring it.
Moping along the streets, and cursing my day as I wandered,
All of a sudden my ear met the sound of an English psalm-tune:
Comfort me it did, till indeed I was very near crying.
Ah, there is some great truth, partial very likely, but needful,
Lodged, I am strangely sure, in the tones of the English psalm-tune:
Comfort it was at least; and I must take without question
Comfort, however it come, in the dreary streets of the city.

"What with trusting myself, and seeking support from within me,
Almost I could believe I had gained a religious assurance,
Formed in my own poor soul a great moral basis to rest on.
Ah, but indeed I see, I feel it factitious entirely;
I refuse, reject, and put it utterly from me;
I will look straight out, see things, not try to evade them;
Fact shall be fact for me, and the Truth the Truth as ever,

* "Amours de Voyage," v. 2. † Ibid., v. 5.

Digitized by Google

Flexible, changeable, vague, and multiform, and doubtful. —
Off, and depart to the void, thou subtle, fanatical tempter!"

Mr. Clough's fate in life had been such as to exaggerate this naturally peculiar temper. He was a pupil of Arnold's; one of his best, most susceptible, and favorite pupils. Some years since, there was much doubt and interest as to the effect of Arnold's teaching. His sudden death, so to say, cut his life in the middle, and opened a tempting discussion as to the effect of his teaching when those taught by him should have become men and not boys. The interest which his own character then awakened, and must always awaken, stimulated the discussion, and there was much doubt about it. But now we need doubt no longer. The Rugby "men" are *real* men, and the world can pronounce its judgment. Perhaps that part of the world which cares for such things has pronounced it. Dr. Arnold was almost indisputably an admirable master for a common English boy, — the small, apple-eating animal whom we know. He worked — he pounded, if the phrase may be used — into the boy a belief, or at any rate a floating, confused conception, that there are great subjects, that there are strange problems, that knowledge has an indefinite value, that life is a serious and solemn thing. The influence of Arnold's teaching upon the majority of his pupils was probably very vague, but very good. To impress on the ordinary Englishman a general notion of the importance of what is intellectual and the reality of what is supernatural, is the greatest benefit which can be conferred upon him. The common English mind is too coarse, sluggish, and worldly to take such lessons too much to heart. It is improved by them in many ways, and is not harmed by them at all. But there are a few minds which are very likely to think too much of such things. A susceptible, serious, intellectual boy may be injured by the incessant inculcation of the awfulness of life and the magnitude of great problems. It is not desirable to take this world too much

Digitized by Google

au sérieux: most persons will not; and the one in a thousand who will, should not. Mr. Clough was one of those who will. He was one of Arnold's favorite pupils, because he gave heed so much to Arnold's teaching; and exactly because he gave heed to it, was it bad for him. He required quite another sort of teaching: to be told to take things easily; not to try to be wise overmuch; to be "something beside critical"; to go on living quietly and obviously, and see what truth would come to him. Mr. Clough had to his latest years what may be noticed in others of Arnold's disciples, — a fatigued way of looking at great subjects. It seemed as if he had been put into them before his time, had seen through them, heard all which could be said about them, had been bored by them, and had come to want something else.

A still worse consequence was, that* the faith, the doctrinal teaching which Arnold impressed on the youths about him, was one personal to Arnold himself, which arose out of the peculiarities of his own character, which can only be explained by them. As soon as an inquisitive mind was thrown into a new intellectual atmosphere, and was obliged to naturalize itself in it, to consider the creed it had learned with reference to the facts which it encountered and met, much of that creed must fade away. There were inevitable difficulties in it, which only the personal peculiarities of Arnold prevented his perceiving, and which every one else must soon perceive. The new intellectual atmosphere into which Mr. Clough was thrown was peculiarly likely to have this disenchanting effect. It was the Oxford of Father Newman; an Oxford utterly different from Oxford as it is, or from the same place as it had been twenty years before. A complete estimate of that remarkable thinker cannot be given here: it would be no easy task even now, many years after this influence has declined, nor is it necessary for the present purpose. Two

* Meaningless from bad syntax. Read "A still worse consequence was, that *as* the teaching . . . was personal," etc., it "must fade away." — ED.

Digitized by Google

points are quite certain of Father Newman, and they are the only two which are at present material. He was undeniably a consummate master of the difficulties of the creeds of other men. With a profoundly religious organization which was hard to satisfy, with an imagination which could not help setting before itself simply and exactly what different creeds would come to and mean in life, with an analyzing and most subtle intellect which was sure to detect the weak point in an argument if a weak point there was, with a manner at once grave and fascinating,—he was a nearly perfect religious disputant, whatever may be his deficiencies as a religious teacher. The most accomplished theologian of another faith would have looked anxiously to the joints of his harness before entering the lists with an adversary so prompt and keen. To suppose that a youth fresh from Arnold's teaching, with a hasty faith in a scheme of thought radically inconsistent, should be able to endure such an encounter, was absurd. Arnold flattered himself that he was a principal opponent of Mr. Newman; but he was rather a principal fellow-laborer. There was but one quality in a common English boy which would have enabled him to resist such a reasoner as Mr. Newman. We have a heavy apathy on exciting topics, which enables us to leave dilemmas unsolved, to forget difficulties, to go about our pleasure or our business, and to leave the reasoner to pursue his logic: "anyhow he is very *long*,"—*that* we comprehend. But it was exactly this happy apathy, this commonplace indifference, that Arnold prided himself on removing. He objected strenuously to Mr. Newman's creed, but he prepared anxiously the very soil in which that creed was sure to grow. A multitude of such minds as Mr. Clough's, from being Arnoldites, became Newmanites.

A second quality in Mr. Newman is at least equally clear. He was much better skilled in finding out the difficulties of other men's creeds than in discovering

Digitized by Google

and stating a distinct basis for his own. In most of his characteristic works he does not even attempt it. His argument is essentially an argument *ad hominem;* an argument addressed to the present creed of the person with whom he is reasoning. He says, "Give up what you hold already, or accept what I now say; for that which you already hold involves it." Even in books where he is especially called on to deal with matters of first principle, the result is unsatisfactory. We have heard it said that he has in later life accounted for the argumentative vehemence of his book *against* the Church of Rome by saying, "I did it as a duty; I *put* myself into a state of mind to write that book."* And this is just the impression which his arguments give. His elementary principles seem *made,* not born. Very likely he would admit the fact, and yet defend his practice. He would say, "Such a being as man is, in such a world as this is,† *must* do so; he must make a venture for his religion. He may see a greater probability that the doctrine of the Church is true than that it is false; he may see before he believes in her that she has greater evidence than any other creed: but he must do the rest for himself. *By means of his will* he must put himself into a new state of mind; he must cast in his lot with the Church here and hereafter: *then* his belief will gradually strengthen; he will in time become sure of what she says." He undoubtedly, in the time of his power, persuaded many young men to try some such process as this. The weaker, the more credulous, and the more fervent were able to persevere; those who had not distinct perceptions of real truth, who were dreamy and fanciful by nature, persevered without difficulty. But Mr. Clough could not do so: he felt it was "something factitious."‡ He began to speak of "the ruinous force of the will,"§ and "our terrible notions of duty";‖ he ceased to be a Newmanite.

* He says it repeatedly himself (in substance) in his "Apologia pro Vita Sua." — Ed. † See note to Vol. ii., page 109.

‡ ‖ "Amours de Voyage," ii. 13. § Ibid., iii. 7.

Digitized by Google

Thus Mr. Clough's career and life were exactly those most likely to develop and foster a morbid peculiarity of his intellect. He had, as we have explained, by nature an unusual difficulty in forming a creed as to the unseen world: he could not get the visible world out of his head; his strong grasp of plain facts and obvious matters was a difficulty to him. Too easily one great teacher inculcated a remarkable creed; then another great teacher took it away; then this second teacher made him believe for a time some of his own artificial faith; then it would not do. He fell back on that vague, impalpable, unembodied religion which we have attempted to describe.

He has himself given in a poem, now first published,* a very remarkable description of this curious state of mind. He has prefixed to it the characteristic motto, "Il doutait de tout, même de l'amour."† It is the delineation of a certain love passage in the life of a hesitating young gentleman, who was in Rome at the time of the revolution of 1848; who could not make up his mind about the revolution, who could not make up his mind whether he liked Rome, who could not make up his mind whether he liked the young lady, who let her go away without him, who went in pursuit of her and could not make out which way to look for her, — who, in fine, has some sort of religion, but cannot himself tell what it is. The poem was not published in the author's lifetime; and there are some lines which we are persuaded he would have further polished, and some parts which he would have improved, if he had seen them in print. It is written in conversational hexameters, in a tone of semi-satire and half-belief. Part of the commencement is a good example of them: —

"Rome disappoints me much: I hardly as yet understand, but
Rubbishy seems the word that most exactly would suit it.
All the foolish destructions, and all the sillier savings,
All the incongruous things of the past incompatible ages,
Seem to be treasured up here to make fools of present and future.

* "Amours de Voyage." † "He doubted everything, even love."

Digitized by Google

Would to Heaven the old Goths had made a cleaner sweep of it!
Would to Heaven some new ones would come and destroy these churches!
However, one can live in Rome as also in London.
Rome is better than London, because it is other than London.
It is a blessing, no doubt, to be rid, at least for a time, of
All one's friends and relations, — yourself (forgive me!) included, —
All the *assujettissement* of having been what one has been,
What one thinks one is, or thinks that others suppose one;
Yet, in despite of all, we turn like fools to the English.
Vernon has been my fate; who is here the same that you knew him, —
Making the tour, it seems, with friends of the name of Trevellyn.

"Rome disappoints me still; but I shrink and adapt myself to it.
Somehow a tyrannous sense of a superincumbent oppression
Still, wherever I go, accompanies ever, and makes me
Feel like a tree (shall I say?) buried under a ruin of brick-work.
Rome, believe me, my friend, is like its own Monte Testaceo,
Merely a marvelous mass of broken and cast-away wine pots.
Ye gods! what do I want with this rubbish of ages departed,
Things that Nature abhors, the experiments that she has failed in?
What do I find in the Forum? An archway and two or three pillars.
Well, but St. Peter's? Alas, Bernini has filled it with sculpture!
No one can cavil, I grant, at the size of the great Coliseum:
Doubtless the notion of grand and capacious and massive amusement,
This the old Romans had; but tell me, is this an idea?
Yet of solidity much, but of splendor little is extant:
'Brick-work I found thee, and marble I left thee!' their Emperor vaunted:
'Marble I thought thee, and brick-work I find thee!' the tourist may answer."

As he goes on, he likes Rome rather better, but hazards the following imprecation on the Jesuits: —

"Luther, they say, was unwise: he didn't see how things were going;
Luther was foolish, — but, O great God! what call you Ignatius?
O my tolerant soul, be still! but you talk of barbarians, —
Alaric, Attila, Genseric; — why, they came, they killed, they
Ravaged, and went on their way: but these vile, tyrannous Spaniards,

Digitized by Google

These are here still,— how long, O ye heavens, in the country of Dante?
These, that fanaticized Europe, which now can forget them, release not
This, their choicest of prey, this Italy; here you see them,—
Here, with emasculate pupils and gimcrack churches of Gesù,
Pseudo-learning and lies, confessional-boxes and postures,—
Here, with metallic beliefs and regimental devotions,—
Here, overcrusting with slime, perverting, defacing, debasing
Michael Angelo's dome, that had hung the Pantheon in heaven,
Raphael's Joys and Graces, and thy clear stars, Galileo!"

The plot of the poem is very simple, and certainly is not very exciting. The moving force, as in most novels of verse or prose, is the love of the hero for the heroine; but this love assuredly is not of a very impetuous and overpowering character. The interest of this story is precisely that it is not overpowering. The over-intellectual hero, over-anxious to be composed, will not submit himself to his love; over-fearful of what is voluntary and factitious, he will not make an effort and cast in his lot with it. He states his view of the subject better than we can state it:—

"I am in love, meantime, you think; no doubt you would think so.
I am in love, you say; with those letters, of course, you would say so.
I am in love, you declare. I think not so; yet I grant you
It is a pleasure indeed to converse with this girl. Oh, rare gift,
Rare felicity, this! she can talk in a rational way, can
Speak upon subjects that really are matters of mind and of thinking,
Yet in perfection retain her simplicity; never, one moment,
Never, however you urge it, however you tempt her, consents to
Step from ideas and fancies and loving sensations to those vain
Conscious understandings that vex the minds of man-kind.
No, though she talk, it is music; her fingers desert not the keys; 'tis
Song, though you hear in the song the articulate vocables sounded,
Syllabled singly and sweetly the words of melodious meaning.
I am in love, you say; I do not think so, exactly.

"There are two different kinds, I believe, of human attraction:
One which simply disturbs, unsettles, and makes you uneasy,

Digitized by Google

And another that poises, retains, and fixes and holds you.
I have no doubt, for myself, in giving my voice for the latter.
I do not wish to be moved, but growing where I was growing,
There more truly to grow, to live where as yet I had languished.
I do not like being moved: for the will is excited; and action
Is a most dangerous thing; I tremble for something factitious,
Some malpractice of heart and illegitimate process:
We are so prone to these things, with our terrible notions of duty.
Ah, let me look, let me watch, let me wait, unhurried, unprompted!
Bid me not venture on aught that could alter or end what is present!
Say not, Time flies, and Occasion, that never returns, is departing!
Drive me not out, ye ill angels with fiery swords, from my Eden,
Waiting, and watching, and looking! Let love be its own inspiration!
Shall not a voice, if a voice there must be, from the airs that environ,
Yea, from the conscious heavens, without our knowledge or effort,
Break into audible words? and love be its own inspiration?"

It appears, however, that even this hesitating hero would have come to the point at last. In a book, at least, the hero has nothing else to do. The inevitable restrictions of a pretty story hem him in: to wind up the plot, he must either propose or die, and usually he prefers proposing. Mr. Claude — for such is the name of Mr. Clough's hero — is evidently on his road towards the inevitable alternative, when his fate intercepts him by the help of a person who meant nothing less. There is a sister of the heroine, who is herself engaged to a rather quick person, and who cannot make out any one's conducting himself differently from her George Vernon. She writes: —

"Mr. Claude, you must know, is behaving a little bit better;
He and Papa are great friends; but he really is too *shilly-shally*, —
So unlike George! Yet I hope that the matter is going on fairly.
I shall, however, get George, before he goes, to say something.
Dearest Louisa, how delightful to bring young people together!"

As the heroine says, "dear Georgina" wishes for nothing so much as to show her adroitness. George

Digitized by Google

Vernon does interfere, and Mr. Claude may describe for himself the change it makes in his fate:—

"Tibur is beautiful too, and the orchard slopes, and the Anio
Falling, falling yet, to the ancient lyrical cadence;
Tibur and Anio's tide; and cool from Lucretilis ever,
With the Digentian stream, and with the Bandusian fountain,
Folded in Sabine recesses, the valley and villa of Horace:—
So not seeing I sung; so seeing and listening say I,
Here as I sit by the stream, as I gaze at the cell of the Sibyl,
Here with Albunea's home and the grove of Tiburnus beside me;*
Tivoli beautiful is, and musical, O Teverone,
Dashing from mountain to plain, thy parted impetuous waters!
Tivoli's waters and rocks; and fair under Monte Gennaro,
(Haunt even yet, I must think, as I wander and gaze, of the shadows,
Faded and pale, yet immortal, of Faunus, the Nymphs, and the Graces,)
Fair in itself, and yet fairer with human completing creations,
Folded in Sabine recesses, the valley and villa of Horace:—
So not seeing I sung; so now— Nor seeing, nor hearing,
Neither by waterfall lulled, nor folded in sylvan embraces,
Neither by cell of the Sibyl, nor stepping the Monte Gennaro,
Seated on Anio's bank, nor sipping Bandusian waters,
But on Montorio's height, looking down on the tile-clad streets, the
Cupolas, crosses, and domes, the bushes and kitchen-gardens,
Which, by the grace of the Tiber, proclaim themselves Rome of the Romans,—
But on Montorio's height, looking forth to the vapory mountains,
Cheating the prisoner Hope with illusions of vision and fancy,—
But on Montorio's height, with these weary soldiers by me,
Waiting till Oudinot enter, to reinstate Pope and tourist.
. . . . . .
Yes, on Montorio's height for a last farewell of the city,—
So it appears; though then I was quite uncertain about it.
So, however, it was. And now to explain the proceeding.
I was to go, as I told you, I think, with the people to Florence.
Only the day before, the foolish family Vernon
Made some uneasy remarks, as we walked to our lodging together,

* "—domus Albuneæ resonantis,
Et præceps Anio, ac Tiburni lucus, et uda
Mobilibus pomaria rivis."—Horace, Od. i., vii. 12.

Digitized by Google

As to intentions, forsooth, and so forth. I was astounded,
Horrified quite; and obtaining just then, as it happened, an offer
(No common favor) of seeing the great Ludovisi collection,
Why, I made this a pretense, and wrote that they must excuse me.
How could I go? Great Heaven! to conduct a permitted flirtation
Under those vulgar eyes, the observed of such observers!
Well, but I now, by a series of fine diplomatic inquiries,
Find from a sort of relation, a good and sensible woman,
Who is remaining at Rome with a brother too ill for removal,
That it was wholly unsanctioned, unknown, — not, I think, by Georgina;
She, however, ere this, — and that is the best of the story, —
She and the Vernon, thank Heaven, are wedded and gone — honeymooning.
So — on Montorio's height for a last farewell of the city.
Tibur I have not seen, nor the lakes that of old I had dreamt of;
Tibur I shall not see, nor Anio's waters, nor deep en-
Folded in Sabine recesses the valley and villa of Horace;
Tibur I shall not see; — but something better I shall see.
Twice I have tried before, and failed in getting the horses;
Twice I have tried and failed: this time it shall not be a failure."

But of course he does not reach Florence till the heroine and her family are gone; and he hunts after them through North Italy, not very skillfully, and then he returns to Rome; and he reflects, certainly not in a very dignified or heroic manner: —

"I cannot stay at Florence, not even to wait for a letter.
Galleries only oppress me. Remembrance of hope I had cherished
(Almost more than as hope, when I passed through Florence the first time)
Lies like a sword in my soul. I am more a coward than ever,
Chicken-hearted, past thought. The *cafés* and waiters distress me.
All is unkind, — and, alas! I am ready for any one's kindness.
Oh, I knew it of old, and knew it, I thought, to perfection:
If there is any one thing in the world to preclude all kindness,
It is the need of it, — it is this sad, self-defeating dependence.
Why is this, Eustace? Myself, were I stronger, I think I could tell you.
But it is odd when it comes. So plumb I the deeps of depression,
Daily in deeper, and find no support, no will, no purpose.

Digitized by Google

All my old strengths are gone. And yet I shall have to do something.
Ah, the key of our life, that passes all wards, opens all locks,
Is not *I will*, but *I must*. I must,—I must,—and I do it.

"After all, do I know that I really cared so about her?
Do whatever I will, I cannot call up her image;
For when I close my eyes, I see, very likely, St. Peter's,
Or the Pantheon facade, or Michael Angelo's figures,
Or, at a wish, when I please, the Alban hills and the Forum,—
But that face, those eyes,—ah, no, never anything like them;
Only, try as I will, a sort of featureless outline,
And a pale blank orb, which no recollection will add to.
After all, perhaps there was something factitious about it:
I have had pain, it is true; I have wept, and so have the actors.

"At the last moment I have your letter, for which I was waiting;
I have taken my place, and see no good in inquiries.
Do nothing more, good Eustace, I pray you. It only will vex me.
Take no measures. Indeed, should we meet, I could not be certain;
All might be changed, you know. Or perhaps there was nothing to be changed.
It is a curious history, this: and yet I foresaw it;
I could have told it before. The Fates, it is clear, are against us;
For it is certain enough that I met with the people you mention;
They were at Florence the day I returned there, and spoke to me even;
Stayed a week, saw me often; departed, and whither I know not.
Great is Fate, and is best. I believe in Providence partly.
What is ordained is right, and all that happens is ordered.
Ah, no, that isn't it. But yet I retain my conclusion.
I will go where I am led, and will not dictate to the chances.
Do nothing more, I beg. If you love me, forbear interfering."

And the heroine, like a sensible, quiet girl, sums up:—

"You have heard nothing; of course, I know you can have heard nothing.
Ah, well, more than once I have broken my purpose, and sometimes,
Only too often, have looked for the little lake-steamer to bring him.
But it is only fancy,—I do not really expect it.
Oh, and you see I know so exactly how he would take it:

Digitized by Google

Finding the chances prevail against meeting again, he would banish
Forthwith every thought of the poor little possible hope, which
I myself could not help, perhaps, thinking only too much of;
He would resign himself, and go. I see it exactly.
So I also submit, although in a different manner.
Can you not really come? We go very shortly to England."

And there let us hope she found a more satisfactory lover and husband.

The same defect which prevented Mr. Claude from obtaining his bride will prevent this poem from obtaining universal popularity. The public like stories which come to something; Mr. Arnold teaches that a great poem must be founded on a great action, and this one is founded on a long inaction. But Art has many mansions. Many poets, whose cast of thought unfits them for very diffused popularity, have yet a concentrated popularity which suits them and which lasts. Henry Taylor has wisely said that "a poet does not deserve the name who would not rather be read a thousand times by one man than a single time by a thousand." This repeated perusal, this testing by continual repetition and close contact, is the very test of intellectual poetry: unless such poetry can identify itself with our nature and dissolve itself into our constant thought, it is nothing, or less than nothing: it is an ineffectual attempt to confer a rare pleasure; it teases by reminding us of that pleasure, and tires by the effort which it demands from us. But if a poem really possesses this capacity of intellectual absorption,—if it really is in matter of fact accepted, apprehended, delighted in, and retained, by a large number of cultivated and thoughtful minds,—its non-recognition by what is called "the public" is no more against it than its non-recognition by the coal-heavers. The half-educated and busy crowd, whom we call "the public," have no more right to impose their limitations on highly educated and meditative thinkers than the uneducated and yet more numerous crowd have to impose their still narrower limitations

Digitized by Google

on the half-educated. The coal-heaver will not read any books whatever; the mass of men will not read an intellectual poem: it can hardly ever be otherwise. But timid thinkers must not dread to have a secret and rare faith. But little deep poetry is very popular, and *no* severe art. Such poetry as Mr. Clough's, especially, can never be so,—its subjects would forbid it, even if its treatment were perfect; but it may have a better fate: it may have a tenacious hold on the solitary, the meditative, and the calm. It is this which Mr. Clough would have wished: he did not desire to be liked by "inferior people,"—at least he would have distrusted any poem of his own which they did like.

The artistic skill of these poems, especially of the poem from which we have extracted so much, and of a long vacation pastoral published in the Highlands, is often excellent, and occasionally fails when you least expect it. There was an odd peculiarity in Mr. Clough's mind: you never could tell whether it was that he would not show himself to the best advantage, or whether he *could* not; it is certain that he very often did not, whether in life or in books. His intellect moved with a great difficulty, and it had a larger inertia than any other which we have ever known. Probably there was an awkwardness born with him, and his shyness and pride prevented him from curing that awkwardness as most men would have done. He felt he might fail, and he knew that he hated to fail. He neglected, therefore, many of the thousand petty trials which fashion and form the accomplished man of the world. Accordingly, when at last he wanted to do something, or was obliged to attempt something, he had occasionally a singular difficulty: he could not get his matter out of him.

In poetry he had a further difficulty, arising from perhaps an over-cultivated taste. He was so good a disciple of Wordsworth, he hated so thoroughly the common sing-song metres of Moore and Byron, that

Digitized by Google

he was apt to try to write what will seem to many persons to have scarcely a metre at all. It is quite true that the metre of intellectual poetry should not be so pretty as that of songs, or so plain and impressive as that of vigorous passion. The rhythm should pervade it and animate it, but should not protrude itself upon the surface or intrude itself upon the attention. It should be a latent charm, though a real one. Yet, though this doctrine is true, it is nevertheless a dangerous doctrine. Most writers need the strict fetters of familiar metre: as soon as they are emancipated from this, they fancy that *any* words of theirs are metrical. If a man will read any expressive and favorite words of his own often enough, he will come to believe that they are rhythmical: probably they have a rhythm as he reads them; but no notation of pauses and accents could tell the reader how to read them in that manner, and when read in any other mode they may be prose itself. Some of Mr. Clough's early poems, which are placed at the beginning of this volume, are perhaps examples, more or less, of this natural self-delusion. Their writer could read them as verse, but that was scarcely his business; and the common reader fails.

Of one metre, however,—the hexameter,—we believe the most accomplished judges, and also common readers, agree that Mr. Clough possesses a very peculiar mastery. Perhaps he first showed in English its *flexibility*. Whether any consummate poem of great length and sustained dignity can be written in this metre, and in our language, we do not know: until a great poet has written his poem, there are commonly no lack of plausible arguments that seem to prove he cannot write it; but Mr. Clough has certainly shown that in the hands of a skillful and animated artist, it is capable of adapting itself to varied descriptions of life and manners, to noble sentiments, and to changing thoughts. It is perhaps the most flexible of English metres. Better than any others,

Digitized by Google

it changes from grave to gay without desecrating what should be solemn, or disenchanting that which should be graceful. And Mr. Clough was the first to prove this, by writing a noble poem in which it was done.

In one principal respect, Mr. Clough's two poems in hexameters, and especially the Roman one from which we made so many extracts, are very excellent: somehow or other he makes you understand what the people of whom he is writing precisely were. You may object to the means, but you cannot deny the result. By fate he was thrown into a vortex of theological and metaphysical speculation, but his genius was better suited to be the spectator of a more active and moving scene. The play of mind upon mind; the contrasted view which contrasted minds take of great subjects; the odd irony of life which so often thrusts into conspicuous places exactly what no one would expect to find in those places,— these were his subjects. Under happy circumstances, he might have produced on such themes something which the mass of readers would have greatly liked; as it is, he has produced a little which meditative readers will much value, and which they will long remember.

Of Mr. Clough's character it would be out of place to say anything, except in so far as it elucidates his poems. The sort of conversation for which he was most remarkable rises again in the "Amours de Voyage," and gives them, to those who knew him in life, a very peculiar charm. It would not be exact to call the best lines a pleasant cynicism; for cynicism has a bad name, and the ill-nature and other offensive qualities which have given it that name were utterly out of Mr. Clough's way. Though without much fame, he had no envy. But he had a strong realism. He saw what it is considered cynical to see,—the absurdities of many persons, the pomposities of many creeds, the splendid zeal with which missionaries rush on to

Digitized by Google

teach what they do not know, the wonderful earnestness with which most incomplete solutions of the universe are thrust upon us as complete and satisfying. "Le fond de la Providence," says the French novelist, "c'est l'ironie."* Mr. Clough would not have said that; but he knew what it meant, and what was the portion of truth contained in it. Undeniably this *is* an *odd* world, whether it should have been so or no; and all our speculations upon it should begin with some admission of its strangeness and singularity. The habit of dwelling on such thoughts as these will not of itself make a man happy, and may make unhappy one who is inclined to be so. Mr. Clough in his time felt more than most men the weight of the unintelligible world; but such thoughts make an instructive man. Several survivors may think they owe much to Mr. Clough's quiet question, "Ah, then, you think — ?" Many pretending creeds and many wonderful demonstrations passed away before that calm inquiry. He had a habit of putting your own doctrine concisely before you, so that you might see what it came to, and that you did not like it. Even now that he is gone, some may feel the recollection of his society a check on unreal theories and half-mastered thoughts. Let us part from him in his own words: —

"Some future day, when what is now is not,
When all old faults and follies are forgot,
And thoughts of difference passed like dreams away,—
We'll meet again, upon some future day.

"When all that hindered, all that vexed our love,
The tall, rank weeds that clomb the blade above,
And all but it has yielded to decay,—
We'll meet again, upon some future day.

"When we have proved, each on his course alone,
The wider world, and learnt what's now unknown,
Have made life clear, and worked out each a way,—
We'll meet again; we shall have much to say.

* "Irony is the basis of Providence."

Digitized by Google

"With happier mood, and feelings born anew,
Our boyhood's bygone fancies we'll review,
Talk o'er old talks, play as we used to play,
And meet again, on many a future day.

"Some day, which oft our hearts shall yearn to see,
In some far year, though distant yet to be,
Shall we indeed — ye winds and waters, say! —
Meet yet again, upon some future day?"

Digitized by Google

*WORDSWORTH, TENNYSON, AND BROWNING; OR, PURE, ORNATE, AND GROTESQUE ART IN ENGLISH POETRY.**

(1864.)

We couple these two books together, not because of their likeness, for they are as dissimilar as books can be; nor on account of the eminence of their authors, for in general two great authors are too much for one essay: but because they are the best possible illustration of something we have to say upon poetical art,—because they may give to it life and freshness. The accident of contemporaneous publication has here brought together two books very characteristic of modern art, and we want to show how they are characteristic.

Neither English poetry nor English criticism have ever recovered the *eruption* which they both made at the beginning of this century into the fashionable world. The poems of Lord Byron were received with an avidity that resembles our present avidity for sensation novels, and were read by a class which at present reads little but such novels. Old men who remember those days may be heard to say, "We hear nothing of poetry nowadays: it seems quite down." And "down" it certainly is, if for poetry it be a descent to be no longer the favorite excitement of the more frivolous part of the "upper" world. That stimulating poetry is now little read. A stray schoolboy may still be detected in a wild admiration for the "Giaour" or the "Corsair" (and it is suitable

* Enoch Arden, etc. By Alfred Tennyson, D. C. L., Poet Laureate.—Dramatis Personæ. By Robert Browning.

Digitized by Google

to his age, and he should not be reproached for it); but the *real* posterity, the quiet students of a past literature, never read them or think of them. A line or two linger on the memory; a few telling strokes of occasional and felicitous energy are quoted, — but this is all. As wholes, these exaggerated stories were worthless: they taught nothing, and therefore they are forgotten. If nowadays a dismal poet were, like Byron, to lament the fact of his birth, and to hint that he was too good for the world, the *Saturday Reviewers* would say that "they doubted if he *was* too good"; that "a sulky poet was a questionable addition to a tolerable world"; that "he need not have been born, as far as they were concerned." Doubtless, there is much in Byron besides his dismal exaggeration; but it was that exaggeration which made "the sensation" which gave him a wild moment of dangerous fame. As so often happens, the cause of his momentary fashion is the cause also of his lasting oblivion. Moore's former reputation was less excessive, yet it has not been more permanent. The prettiness of a few songs preserves the memory of his name, but as a poet to *read* he is forgotten. There is nothing to read in him: no exquisite thought, no sublime feeling, no consummate description of true character. Almost the sole result of the poetry of that time is the harm which it has done. It degraded for a time the whole character of the art. It said by practice — by a most efficient and successful practice — that it was the aim, the *duty*, of poets to catch the attention of the passing, the fashionable, the busy world. If a poem "fell dead," it was nothing: it was composed to please the "London" of the year, and if that London did not like it, why, it had failed. It fixed upon the minds of a whole generation, it engraved in popular memory and tradition, a vague conviction that poetry is but one of the many *amusements* for the enjoying classes, for the lighter hours of all classes. The mere notion, the bare idea, that

Digitized by Google

poetry is a deep thing, a teaching thing, the most surely and wisely elevating of human things, is even now to the coarse public mind nearly unknown.

As was the fate of poetry, so inevitably was that of criticism. The science that expounds which poetry is good and which is bad is dependent for its popular reputation on the popular estimate of poetry itself. The critics of that day had *a* day, which is more than can be said for some since: they professed to tell the fashionable world in what books it would find new pleasure, and therefore they were read by the fashionable world. Byron counted the critic and poet equal. The *Edinburgh Review* penetrated among the young, and into places of female resort where it does not go now. As people ask, "Have you read 'Henry Dunbar'? and what do you think of it?" so they then asked, "Have you read the 'Giaour'? and what do you think of it?" Lord Jeffrey, a shrewd judge of the world, employed himself in telling it what to think,—not so much what it ought to think, as what at bottom it did think; and so, by dexterous sympathy with current society, he gained contemporary fame and power. Such fame no critic must hope for now. His articles will not penetrate where the poems themselves do not penetrate. When poetry was noisy, criticism was loud; now poetry is a still small voice, and criticism must be smaller and stiller. As the function of such criticism was limited, so was its subject. For the great and (as time now proves) the *permanent* part of the poetry of his time,—for Shelley and for Wordsworth,—Lord Jeffrey had but one word. He said, "It won't do." And it will not do, to amuse a drawing-room.

The doctrine that poetry is a light amusement for idle hours, a metrical species of sensational novel, did not indeed become popular without gainsayers. Thirty years ago, Mr. Carlyle most rudely contradicted it. But perhaps this is about all that he has done. He has denied, but he has not disproved. He

Digitized by Google

has contradicted the floating paganism, but he has not founded the deep religion. All about and around us a *faith* in poetry struggles to be extricated, but it is not extricated. Some day, at the touch of the true word, the whole confusion will by magic cease; the broken and shapeless notions will cohere and crystallize into a bright and true theory. But this cannot be yet.

But though no complete theory of the poetic art as yet be possible for us, though perhaps only our children's children will be able to speak on this subject with the assured confidence which belongs to accepted truth, yet something of some certainty may be stated on the easier elements, and something that will throw light on these two new books. But it will be necessary to assign reasons, and the assigning of reasons is a dry task. Years ago, when criticism only tried to show how poetry could be made a good amusement, it was not impossible that criticism itself should be amusing. But now it must at least be serious, for we believe that poetry is a serious and a deep thing.

There should be a word in the language of literary art to express what the word "picturesque" expresses for the fine arts. *Picturesque* means fit to be put into a picture; we want a word *literatesque*, "fit to be put into a book." An artist goes through a hundred different country scenes, rich with beauties, charms, and merits, but he does not paint any of them. He leaves them alone; he idles on till he finds the hundred-and-first, — a scene which many observers would not think much of, but which *he* knows by virtue of his art will look well on canvas, — and this he paints and preserves. Susceptible observers though not artists feel this quality too: they say of a scene, "How picturesque!" meaning by this a quality distinct from that of beauty or sublimity or grandeur, — meaning to speak not only of the scene as it is in itself, but also of its fitness for imitation

Digitized by Google

by art; meaning not only that it is good, but that its goodness is such as ought to be transferred to paper; meaning not simply that it fascinates, but also that its fascination is such as ought to be copied by man. A fine and insensible instinct has put language to this subtle use: it expresses an idea without which fine-art criticism could not go on; and it is very natural that the language of pictorial art should be better supplied with words than that of literary criticism, for the eye was used before the mind, and language embodies primitive sensuous ideas long ere it expresses or need express abstract and literary ones.

The reason why a landscape is "picturesque" is often said to be, that such landscape represents an "idea." But this explanation, though in the minds of some who use it it is near akin to the truth, fails to explain that truth to those who did not know it before; the word "idea" is so often used in these subjects when people do not know anything else to say, it represents so often a kind of intellectual insolvency when philosophers are at their wits' end, that shrewd people will never readily on any occasion give it credit for meaning anything. A wise explainer must therefore look out for other words to convey what he has to say. *Landscapes*, like everything else in nature, divide themselves as we look at them into a sort of rude classification. We go down a river, for example, and we see a hundred landscapes on both sides of it, resembling one another in much, yet differing in something; with trees here, and a farm-house there, and shadows on one side, and a deep pool far on,—a collection of circumstances most familiar in themselves, but making a perpetual novelty by the magic of their various combinations. We travel so for miles and hours, and then we come to a scene which also has these various circumstances and adjuncts, but which combines them best, which makes the best whole of them, which shows

Digitized by Google

them in their best proportion at a single glance before the eye. Then we say, "This is the place to paint the river: this is the picturesque point!" Or if not artists or critics of art, we feel without analysis or examination that somehow this bend or sweep of the river shall in future *be the river to us:* that it is the image of it which we will retain in our mind's eye, by which we will remember it, which we will call up when we want to describe or think of it. Some fine countries, some beautiful rivers, have not this picturesque quality: they give us elements of beauty, but they do not combine them together; we go on for a time delighted, but *after* a time somehow we get wearied; we feel that we are taking in nothing and learning nothing; we get no collected image before our mind; we see the accidents and circumstances of that sort of scenery, but the summary scene we do not see; we find *disjecta membra,* but no form; various and many and faulty approximations are displayed in succession, but the absolute perfection in that country's or river's scenery—its *type*—is withheld. We go away from such places in part delighted, but in part baffled: we have been puzzled by pretty things; we have beheld a hundred different inconsistent specimens of the same sort of beauty, but the rememberable idea, the full development, the characteristic individuality of it, we have not seen.

We find the same sort of quality in all parts of painting. We see a portrait of a person we know, and we say, "It is like—yes, like, of course, but it is not the *man*"; we feel it could not be any one else, but still, somehow it fails to bring home to us the individual as we know him to be. *He* is not there. An accumulation of features like his are painted, but his essence is not painted; an approximation more or less excellent is given, but the characteristic expression, the *typical* form of the man is withheld.

Digitized by Google

Literature—the painting of words—has the same quality, but wants the analogous word. The word *literatesque* would mean, if we possessed it, that perfect combination in the *subject-matter* of literature which suits the *art* of literature. We often meet people and say of them, sometimes meaning well and sometimes ill, "How well So-and-so would do in a book!" Such people are by no means the best people; but they are the most effective people, the most rememberable people. Frequently, when we first know them, we like them because they explain to us so much of our experience. We have known many people "like that," in one way or another, but we did not seem to understand them; they were nothing to us, for their traits were indistinct; we forgot them, for they hitched on to nothing and we could not classify them: but when we see the *type* of the genus, at once we seem to comprehend its character; the inferior specimens are explained by the perfect embodiment; the approximations are definable when we know the ideal to which they draw near. There are an infinite number of classes of human beings; but in each of these classes there is a distinctive type which, if we could expand it in words, would define the class. We cannot expand it in formal terms any more than a landscape, or a species of landscape; but we have an art, an art of words, which can draw it. Travelers and others often bring home, in addition to their long journals,—which, though so living to them, are so dead, so inanimate, so undescriptive to all else,—a pen-and-ink sketch, rudely done very likely, but which, perhaps even the more for the blots and strokes, gives a distinct notion, an emphatic image, to all who see it. We say at once, *Now* we know the sort of thing. The sketch has *hit* the mind. True literature does the same. It describes sorts, varieties, and permutations, by delineating the type of each sort; the ideal of each variety; the central, the marking trait of each permutation.

Digitized by Google

On this account, the greatest artists of the world have ever shown an enthusiasm for reality. To care for notions and abstractions, to philosophize, to reason out conclusions, to care for schemes of thought, are signs in the artistic mind of secondary excellence. A Schiller, a Euripides, a Ben Jonson cares for *ideas*, — for the parings of the intellect and the distillation of the mind; a Shakespeare, a Homer, a Goethe finds his mental occupation, the true home of his natural thoughts, in the real world, — "which is the world of all of us;" * — where the face of nature, the moving masses of men and women, are ever changing, ever multiplying, ever mixing one with the other. The reason is plain: the business of the poet, of the artist, is with *types;* and those types are mirrored in reality. As a painter must not only have a hand to execute, but an eye to distinguish, — as he must go here and there through the real world to catch the picturesque man, the picturesque scene, which is to live on his canvas, — so the poet must find in that reality the *literatesque* man, the *literatesque* scene, which nature intends for him, and which will live in his page. Even in reality he will not find this type complete, or the characteristics perfect; but there he will find at least something, some hint, some intimation, some suggestion: whereas, in the stagnant home of his own thoughts he will find nothing pure, nothing as it is, nothing which does not bear his own mark, which is not somehow altered by a mixture with himself.

The first conversation of Goethe and Schiller illustrates this conception of the poet's art. Goethe was at that time prejudiced against Schiller, we must remember, partly from what he considered the outrages of the "Robbers," partly because of the philosophy of Kant. Schiller's "Essay on Grace and Dignity," he tells us,

"Was yet less of a kind to reconcile me. The philosophy of Kant, which exalts the dignity of mind so highly while appearing to restrict it, Schiller had joyfully embraced: it unfolded the

* Wordsworth, "Prelude," Book xi.

Digitized by Google

extraordinary qualities which Nature had implanted in him; and in the lively feeling of freedom and self-direction, he showed himself unthankful to the Great Mother, who surely had not acted like a stepdame towards him. Instead of viewing her as self-subsisting, as producing with a living force, and according to appointed laws, alike the highest and the lowest of her works, he took her up under the aspect of some empirical native qualities of the human mind. Certain harsh passages I could even directly apply to myself: they exhibited my confession of faith in a false light; and I felt that if written without particular attention to me, they were still worse, for in that case the vast chasm which lay between us gaped but so much the more distinctly."

After a casual meeting at a Society for Natural History, they walked home, and Goethe proceeds:—

"We reached his house; the talk induced me to go in. I then expounded to him, with as much vivacity as possible, the 'Metamorphosis of Plants'*; drawing out on paper, with many characteristic strokes, a symbolic plant for him, as I proceeded. He heard and saw all this, with much interest and distinct comprehension; but when I had done, he shook his head and said, 'This is no experiment, this is an idea.' I stopped with some degree of irritation; for the point which separated us was most luminously marked by this expression. The opinions in 'Dignity and Grace' again occurred to me; the old grudge was just awakening: but I smothered it, and merely said 'I was happy to find that I had got ideas without knowing it, — nay, that I saw them before my eyes.'

"Schiller had much more prudence and dexterity of management than I; he was also thinking of his periodical the 'Horen' about this time, and of course rather wished to attract than repel me. Accordingly, he answered me like an accomplished Kantite; and as my stiff-necked Realism gave occasion to many contradictions, much battling took place between us, and at last a truce, in which neither party would consent to yield the victory, but each held himself invincible. Positions like the following grieved me to the very soul: *How can there ever be an experiment that shall correspond with an idea? The specific quality of an idea is, that no experiment can reach it or agree with it.* Yet if he held as an idea the

* "A curious physiologico-botanical theory by Goethe, which appears to be entirely unknown in this country: though several eminent Continental botanists have noticed it with commendation. It is explained at considerable length in this same *Morphologie*." — *Note by Carlyle.*

Digitized by Google

same thing which I looked upon as an experiment, there must certainly, I thought, be some community between us,—some ground whereon both of us might meet!"*

With Goethe's natural history, or with Kant's philosophy, we have here no concern; but we can combine the expressions of the two great poets into a nearly complete description of poetry. The "symbolic plant" is the *type* of which we speak; the ideal at which inferior specimens aim; the class characteristic in which they all share, but which none shows forth fully. Goethe was right in searching for this in reality and nature; Schiller was right in saying that it was an "idea," a transcending notion to which approximations could be found in experience, but only approximations,—which could not be found there itself. Goethe, as a poet, rightly felt the primary necessity of outward suggestion and experience; Schiller, as a philosopher, rightly felt its imperfection.

But in these delicate matters it is easy to misapprehend. There is undoubtedly a sort of poetry which is produced, as it were, out of the author's mind. The description of the poet's own moods and feelings is a common sort of poetry,—perhaps the commonest sort. But the peculiarity of such cases is, that the poet does not describe himself *as* himself; autobiography is not his object: he takes himself as a specimen of human nature; he describes, not himself, but a distillation of himself; he takes such of his moods as are most characteristic, as most typify certain moods of certain men, or certain moods of all men; he chooses preponderant feelings of special sorts of men, or occasional feelings of men of all sorts: but with whatever other difference and diversity, the essence is that such self-describing poets describe what is *in* them, but not *peculiar* to them,—what is generic, not what is special and individual. Gray's "Elegy" describes a mood which Gray felt more than other men, but which most others, perhaps all others, feel too. It is more popular, perhaps, than any [other] English poem,

* Appendix to Carlyle's "Life of Schiller," Note C.

Digitized by Google

because that sort of feeling is the most diffused of high feelings, and because Gray added to a singular nicety of fancy a habitual proneness to a *contemplative*—a discerning but unbiased—meditation on death and on life. Other poets cannot hope for such success: a subject so popular, so grave, so wise, and yet so suitable to the writer's nature, is hardly to be found. But the same ideal, the same unautobiographical character, is to be found in the writings of meaner men. Take sonnets of Hartley Coleridge, for example:—

I.

TO A FRIEND.

"When we were idlers with the loitering rills,
The need of human love we little noted:
Our love was nature; and the peace that floated
On the white mist, and dwelt upon the hills,
To sweet accord subdued our wayward wills:
One soul was ours, one mind, one heart devoted,—
That, wisely doting, asked not why it doted,—
And ours the unknown joy, which knowing kills.
But now I find how dear thou wert to me;
That man is more than half of nature's treasure,
Of that fair Beauty which no eye can see,
Of that sweet music which no ear can measure:
And now the streams may sing for others' pleasure,
The hills sleep on in their eternity.

II.

TO THE SAME.

"In the great city we are met again,
Where many souls there are that breathe and die
Scarce knowing more of nature's potency
Than what they learn from heat or cold or rain,
The sad vicissitude of weary pain;
For busy man is lord of ear and eye,
And what hath nature but the vast, void sky,
And the thronged river toiling to the main?
Oh! say not so, for she shall have her part
In every smile, in every tear that falls,
And she shall hide her in the secret heart,
Where love persuades and sterner duty calls;

Digitized by Google

But worse it were than death or sorrow's smart,
To live without a friend within these walls.

III.

TO THE SAME.

"We parted on the mountains, as two streams
From one clear spring pursue their several ways:
And thy fleet course hath been through many a maze
In foreign lands, where silvery Padus gleams
To that delicious sky whose glowing beams
Brightened the tresses that old poets praise;
Where Petrarch's patient love and artful lays,
And Ariosto's song of many themes,
Moved the soft air. But I, a lazy brook,
As close pent up within my native dell,
Have crept along from nook to shady nook,
Where flow'rets blow and whispering Naiads dwell.
Yet now we meet that parted were so wide,
O'er rough and smooth to travel side by side."

The contrast of instructive and enviable locomotion with refining but instructive meditation is not special and peculiar to these two, but general and universal. It was set down by Hartley Coleridge because he was the most meditative and refining of men.

What sort of literatesque types are fit to be described in the sort of literature called poetry is a matter on which much might be written. Mr. Arnold, some years since, put forth a theory that the art of poetry could only delineate *great actions*. But though, rightly interpreted and understood, — using the word "action" so as to include high and sound activity in contemplation, — this definition may suit the highest poetry, it certainly cannot be stretched to include many inferior sorts and even many good sorts. Nobody in their senses would describe Gray's "Elegy" as the delineation of a "great action": some kinds of mental contemplation may be energetic enough to deserve this name, but Gray would have been frightened at the very word. He loved scholar-like calm and quiet inaction; his very greatness depended on

Digitized by Google

his *not* acting, on his "wise passiveness," on his indulging the grave idleness which so well appreciates so much of human life. But the best answer [to] — the *reductio ad absurdum* of — Mr. Arnold's doctrine is the mutilation which it has caused him to make of his own writings. It has forbidden him, he tells us, to reprint "Empedocles," — a poem undoubtedly containing defects and even excesses, but containing also these lines: —

"And yet what days were those, Parmenides!
When we were young, when we could number friends
In all the Italian cities like ourselves,
When with elated hearts we joined your train,
Ye sun-born virgins! on the road of Truth.
Then we could still enjoy; then neither thought
Nor outward things were closed and dead to us,
But we received the shock of mighty thoughts
On simple minds with a pure natural joy;
And if the sacred load oppressed our brain,
We had the power to feel the pressure eased,
The brow unbound, the thoughts flow free again,
In the delightful commerce of the world.
We had not lost our balance then, nor grown
Thought's slaves, and dead to every natural joy.
The smallest thing could give us pleasure then:
The sports of the country people;
A flute note from the woods;
Sunset over the sea:
Seed-time and harvest;
The reapers in the corn;
The vine-dresser in his vineyard;
The village girl at her wheel.
Fullness of life and power of feeling, ye
Are for the happy, for the souls at ease,
Who dwell on a firm basis of content.
But he who has outlived his prosperous days, —
But he whose youth fell on a different world
From that on which his exiled age is thrown;
Whose mind was fed on other food, was trained
By other rules than are in vogue to-day;
Whose habit of thought is fixed, who will not change,
But in a world he loves not must subsist

Digitized by Google

In ceaseless opposition, be the guard
Of his own breast, fettered to what he guards,
That the world win no mastery over him;
Who has no friend, no fellow left, not one;
Who has no minute's breathing space allowed
To nurse his dwindling faculty of joy,—
Joy and the outward world must die to him
As they are dead to me."

What freak of criticism can induce a man who has written such poetry as this to discard it, and say it is not poetry? Mr. Arnold is privileged to speak of his own poems, but no other critic could speak so and not be laughed at.

We are disposed to believe that no very sharp definition can be given—at least in the present state of the critical art—of the boundary line between poetry and other sorts of imaginative delineation. Between the undoubted dominions of the two kinds there is a debatable land. Everybody is agreed that the "Œdipus at Colonus" is poetry; every one is agreed that the wonderful appearance of Mrs. Veal* is *not* poetry: but the exact line which separates grave novels in verse, like "Aylmer's Field" or "Enoch Arden," from grave novels not in verse, like "Silas Marner" or "Adam Bede," we own we cannot draw with any confidence. Nor, perhaps, is it very important: whether a narrative is thrown into verse or not certainly depends in part on the taste of the age, and in part on its mechanical helps. Verse is the only mechanical help to the memory in rude times; and there is little writing till a cheap something is found to write upon, and a cheap something to write with. Poetry—verse, at least—is the literature of *all work* in early ages: it is only later ages which write in what *they* think a natural and simple prose. There are other casual influences in the matter too; but they are not material now. We need only say here that poetry, because it has a more marked rhythm than prose, must be more intense in meaning

* De Foe's.

Digitized by Google

and more concise in style than prose. People expect a "marked rhythm" to imply something worth marking; if it fails to do so they are disappointed. They are displeased at the visible waste of a powerful instrument: they call it "doggerel," and rightly call it; for the metrical expression of full thought and eager feeling, the burst of meter, incident to high imagination should not be wasted on petty matters which prose does as well,—which it does better, which it suits by its very limpness and weakness, whose small changes it follows more easily and to whose lowest details it can fully and without effort degrade itself. Verse, too, should be *more concise;* for long-continued rhythm tends to jade the mind, just as brief rhythm tends to attract the attention. Poetry should be memorable and emphatic, intense, and *soon over.*

The great divisions of poetry, and of all other literary art, arise from the different modes in which these *types*—these characteristic men, these characteristic feelings—may be variously described. There are three principal modes which we shall attempt to describe: the *pure,* which is sometimes, but not very wisely, called the "classical"; the *ornate,* which is also unwisely called "romantic"; and the *grotesque,* which might be called the "mediæval." We will describe the nature of these a little. Criticism, we know, must be brief,—not, like poetry, because its charm is too intense to be sustained, but on the contrary, because its interest is too weak to be prolonged; but elementary criticism, if an evil, is a necessary evil: a little while spent among the simple principles of art is the first condition, the absolute prerequisite, for surely apprehending and wisely judging the complete embodiments and miscellaneous forms of actual literature.

The definition of *pure* literature is, that it describes the type in its simplicity; we mean, with the exact amount of accessory circumstance which is

Digitized by Google

necessary to bring it before the mind in finished perfection, and no more than that amount. The *type* needs some accessories from its nature: a picturesque landscape does not consist wholly of picturesque features. There is a setting of surroundings — as the Americans would say, of fixings — without which the reality is not itself. By a traditional mode of speech, as soon as we see a picture in which a complete effect is produced by detail so rare and so harmonized as to escape us, we say, "How classical!" The whole which is to be seen appears at once and through the detail, but the detail itself is not seen: we do not think of that which gives us the idea, — we are absorbed in the idea itself. Just so in literature: the pure art is that which works with the fewest strokes, — the fewest, that is, for its purpose: for its aim is to call up and bring home to men an idea, a form, a character; and if that idea be twisted, that form be involved, that character perplexed, many strokes of literary art will be needful. Pure art does not mutilate its object: it represents it as fully as is possible with the slightest effort which is possible; it shrinks from no needful circumstances, as little as it inserts any which are needless. The precise peculiarity is not merely that no incidental circumstance is inserted which does not tell on the main design, — no art is fit to be called *art* which permits a stroke to be put in without an object, — but that only the minimum of such circumstance is inserted at all. The form is sometimes said to be bare, the accessories are sometimes said to be invisible, because the appendages are so choice that the shape only is perceived.

The English literature undoubtedly contains much impure literature, — impure in its style, if not in its meaning: but it also contains one great, one nearly perfect model of the pure style in the literary expression of typical *sentiment;* and one not perfect, but gigantic and close approximation to perfection

Digitized by Google

in the pure delineation of objective character. Wordsworth, perhaps, comes as near to choice purity of style in sentiment as is possible; Milton, with exceptions and conditions to be explained, approaches perfection by the strenuous purity with which he depicts character.

A wit once said that "*pretty* women had more features than *beautiful* women"; and though the expression may be criticized, the meaning is correct. Pretty women seem to have a great number of attractive points, each of which attracts your attention, and each one of which you remember afterwards; yet these points have not grown together, their features have not linked themselves into a single inseparable whole. But a beautiful woman is a whole as she is: you no more take her to pieces than a Greek statue; she is not an aggregate of divisible charms, she is a charm in herself. Such ever is the dividing test of pure art: if you catch yourself admiring its details, it is defective; you ought to think of it as a single whole which you must remember, which you must admire, which somehow subdues you while you admire it, which is a "possession" to you "forever."

Of course no individual poem embodies this ideal perfectly; of course every human word and phrase has its imperfections: and if we choose an instance to illustrate that ideal, the instance has scarcely a fair chance. By contrasting it with the ideal, we suggest its imperfections; by protruding it as an example, we turn on its defectiveness the microscope of criticism. Yet these two sonnets of Wordsworth may be fitly read in this place, not because they are quite without faults, or because they are the very best examples of their kind of style, but because they are luminous examples: the compactness of the sonnet and the gravity of the sentiment hedging in the thoughts, restraining the fancy, and helping to maintain a singleness of expression:—

Digitized by Google

THE TROSACHS.

"There's not a nook within this solemn pass
But were an apt confessional for one
Taught by his summer spent, his autumn gone,
That life is but a tale of morning grass
Withered at eve. From scenes of art which chase
That thought away, turn, and with watchful eyes
Feed it 'mid nature's old felicities,
Rocks, rivers, and smooth lakes more clear than glass
Untouched, unbreathed upon. Thrice happy quest,
If from a golden perch of aspen spray
(October's workmanship to rival May)
The pensive warbler of the ruddy breast
That moral sweeten by a heaven-taught lay,
Lulling the year, with all its cares, to rest!"

COMPOSED UPON WESTMINSTER BRIDGE, SEPT. 3, 1802.

"Earth has not anything to show more fair;
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This city now doth like a garment wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theaters, and temples lie
Open unto the fields and to the sky,
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendor, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!"

Instances of barer style than this may easily be found, instances of colder style; few* instances of purer style. Not a single expression (the invocation in the concluding couplet of the second sonnet perhaps excepted) can be spared, yet not a single expression rivets the attention. If, indeed, we take out the phrase—

"The city now doth like a garment wear
The beauty of the morning,"

*In the original, "few *better* instances," etc., — a manifest slip. — ED

Digitized by Google

and the description of the brilliant yellow of autumn—

"October's workmanship to rival May,"

they have independent value, but they are not noticed in the sonnet when we read it through: they fall into place there, and being in their place, are not seen. The great subjects of the two sonnets—the religious aspect of beautiful but grave nature, the religious aspect of a city about to awaken and be alive—are the only ideas left in our mind. To Wordsworth has been vouchsafed the last grace of the self-denying artist: you think neither of him nor his style, but you cannot help thinking of—you *must* recall—the exact phrase, the *very* sentiment he wished.

Milton's purity is more eager. In the most exciting parts of Wordsworth—and these sonnets are not very exciting—you always feel, you never forget, that what you have before you is the excitement of a recluse. There is nothing of the stir of life; nothing of the brawl of the world. But Milton, though always a scholar by trade, though solitary in old age, was through life intent on great affairs, lived close to great scenes, watched a revolution, and if not an actor in it, was at least secretary to the actors. He was familiar—by daily experience and habitual sympathy—with the earnest debate of arduous questions, on which the life and death of the speakers certainly depended, on which the weal or woe of the country perhaps depended. He knew how profoundly the individual character of the speakers—their inner and real nature—modifies their opinion on such questions; he knew how surely that nature will appear in the expression of them. This great experience, fashioned by a fine imagination, gives to the debate of the Satanic Council in Pandæmonium its reality and its life. It is a debate in the Long Parliament; and though the theme of "Paradise Lost" obliged Milton to side with the

Digitized by Google

monarchical element in the universe, his old habits are often too much for him, and his real sympathy —the impetus and energy of his nature—side with the rebellious element. For the purposes of art this is much better. Of a court, a poet can make but little; of a heaven, he can make very little: but of a courtly heaven, such as Milton conceived, he can make nothing at all. The idea of a court and the idea of a heaven are so radically different, that a distinct combination of them is always grotesque and often ludicrous. "Paradise Lost," as a whole, is radically tainted by a vicious principle. It professes to justify the ways of God to man, to account for sin and death; and it tells you that the whole originated in a political event,—in a court squabble as to a particular act of patronage, and the due or undue promotion of an eldest son. Satan may have been wrong, but on Milton's theory he had an arguable case at least. There was something arbitrary in the promotion; there were little symptoms of a job: in "Paradise Lost" it is always clear that the devils are the weaker, but it is never clear that the angels are the better. Milton's sympathy and his imagination slip back to the Puritan rebels whom he loved, and desert the courtly angels whom he could not love, although he praised them. There is no wonder that Milton's hell is better than his heaven, for he hated officials and he loved rebels: he employs his genius below, and accumulates his pedantry above. On the great debate in Pandæmonium all his genius is concentrated. The question is very practical; it is, "What are we devils to do, now we have lost heaven?" Satan, who presides over and manipulates the assembly; Moloch,

> "The fiercest spirit
> That fought in heaven, now fiercer by despair,"

who wants to fight again; Belial, "the man of the world," who does not want to fight any more;

Digitized by Google

Mammon, who is for commencing an industrial career; Beelzebub, the official statesman,

> "Deep on his front engraven,
> Deliberation sat and public care,"

who, at Satan's instance, proposes the invasion of earth, — are as distinct as so many statues.

Even Belial, "the man of the world," the sort of man with whom Milton had least sympathy, is perfectly painted. An inferior artist would have made the actor who "counseled ignoble ease and peaceful sloth" a degraded and ugly creature; but Milton knew better. He knew that low notions require a better garb than high notions. Human nature is not a high thing, but at least it has a high idea of itself: it will not accept mean maxims unless they are gilded and made beautiful. A prophet in goatskin may cry "Repent, repent," but it takes "purple and fine linen" to be able to say "Continue in your sins." The world vanquishes with its speciousness and its show, and the orator who is to persuade men to worldliness must have a share in them. Milton well knew this: after the warlike speech of the fierce Moloch, he introduces a brighter and a more graceful spirit:—

> "He ended frowning, and his look denounced
> Desperate revenge, and battle dangerous
> To less than gods. On th' other side up rose
> Belial, in act more graceful and humane:
> A fairer person lost not heaven; he seemed
> For dignity composed and high exploit:
> But all was false and hollow, though his tongue
> Dropt manna, and could make the worse appear
> The better reason, to perplex and dash
> Maturest counsels, — for his thoughts were low;
> To vice industrious, but to nobler deeds
> Timorous and slothful: yet he pleased the ear,
> And with persuasive accent thus began."

He does not begin like a man with a strong case, but like a man with a weak case: he knows that the

Digitized by Google

pride of human nature is irritated by mean advice, and though he may probably persuade men to take it, he must carefully apologize for giving it. Here, as elsewhere, though the formal address is to devils, the real address is to men; to the human nature which we know, not to the fictitious diabolic nature we do not know:—

"I should be much for open war, O peers,
As not behind in hate, if what was urged
Main reason to persuade immediate war
Did not dissuade me most, and seem to cast
Ominous conjecture on the whole success;
When he who most excels in fact of arms,
In what he counsels and in what excels
Mistrustful, grounds his courage on despair
And utter dissolution, as the scope
Of all his aim, after some dire revenge.
First, what revenge? The towers of heaven are filled
With armèd watch, that render all access
Impregnable; oft on the bordering deep
Encamp their legions, or with obscure wing
Scout far and wide into the realm of night,
Scorning surprise. Or could we break our way
By force, and at our heels all hell should rise
With blackest insurrection, to confound
Heaven's purest light, yet our Great Enemy
All incorruptible would on his throne
Sit unpolluted; and th' ethereal mold,
Incapable of stain, would soon expel
Her mischief, and purge off the baser fire,
Victorious. Thus repulsed, our final hope
Is flat despair: we must exasperate
Th' Almighty Victor to spend all his rage,
And that must end us; that must be our cure,—
To be no more! Sad cure; for who would lose,
Though full of pain, this intellectual being,
Those thoughts that wander through eternity,
To perish rather, swallowed up and lost
In the wide womb of uncreated night,
Devoid of sense and motion? And who knows,
Let this be good, whether our angry Foe
Can give it, or will ever? How he can

Digitized by Google

Is doubtful; that he never will, is sure.
Will he, so wise, let loose at once his ire,
Belike through impotence or unaware,
To give his enemies their wish, and end
Them in his anger, whom his anger saves
To punish endless? Wherefore cease we then?
Say they who counsel war, 'We are decreed,
Reserved, and destined to eternal woe:
Whatever doing, what can we suffer more,
What can we suffer worse?' Is this then worst,
Thus sitting, thus consulting, thus in arms?"

And so on.

Mr. Pitt knew this speech by heart, and Lord Macaulay has called it incomparable; and these judges of the oratorial art have well decided. A mean foreign policy cannot be better defended: its sensibleness is effectually explained, and its tameness as much as possible disguised.

But we have not here to do with the excellence of Belial's policy, but with the excellence of his speech; and with that speech in a peculiar manner. This speech, taken with the few lines of description with which Milton introduces it, embodies, in as short a space as possible, with as much perfection as possible, the delineation of a type of character common at all times, dangerous in many times; sure to come to the surface in moments of difficulty, and never more dangerous than then. As Milton describes it, it is one among several *typical* characters which will ever have their place in great councils, which will ever be heard at important decisions, which are part of the characteristic and inalienable whole of this statesmanlike world. The debate in Pandæmonium is a debate among these typical characters at the greatest conceivable crisis, and with adjuncts of solemnity which no other situation could rival. It is the greatest classical triumph, the highest achievement of the pure style in English literature; it is the greatest description of the highest and most typical characters, with the most choice circumstances and in the fewest words.

Digitized by Google

It is not unremarkable that we should find in Milton and in "Paradise Lost" the best specimen of pure style. Milton was a schoolmaster in a pedantic age, and there is nothing so unclassical — nothing so impure in style — as pedantry. The out-of-door conversational life of Athens was as opposed to bookish scholasticism as a life can be. The most perfect books have been written not by those who thought much of books, but by those who thought little; by those who were under the restraint of a sensitive talking world, to which books had contributed something, and a various, eager life the rest. Milton is generally unclassical in spirit where he is learned; and naturally, because the purest poets do not overlay their conceptions with book knowledge, and the classical poets, having in comparison no books, were under little temptation to impair the purity of their style by the accumulation of their research. Over and above this, there is in Milton, and a little in Wordsworth also, one defect which is in the highest degree faulty and unclassical; which mars the effect and impairs the perfection of the pure style. There is a want of spontaneity, and a sense of effort. It has been happily said that Plato's words must have *grown* into their places. No one would say so of Milton, or even of Wordsworth. About both of them there is a taint of duty; a vicious sense of the good man's task. Things seem right where they are, but they seem to be put where they are. Flexibility is essential to the consummate perfection of the pure style, because the sensation of the poet's efforts carries away our thoughts from his achievements. We are admiring his labors when we should be enjoying his words. But this is a defect in those two writers, not a defect in pure art. Of course it *is* more difficult to write in few words than to write in many; to take the best adjuncts, and those only, for what you have to say, instead of using all which comes to hand: it *is* an additional labor, if you write verses in

Digitized by Google

a morning, to spend the rest of the day in *choosing*, — that is, in making those verses fewer. But a perfect artist in the pure style is as effortless and as natural as in any style, perhaps is more so. Take the well-known lines —

> "There was a little lawny islet
> By anemone and violet,
> Like mosaic, paven;
> And its roof was flowers and leaves
> Which the summer's breath enweaves,
> Where nor sun nor showers nor breeze
> Pierce the pines and tallest trees,
> Each a gem engraven;
> Girt by many an azure wave
> With which the clouds and mountains pave
> A lake's blue chasm."*

Shelley had many merits and many defects. This is not the place for a complete — or indeed for any — estimate of him. But one excellence is most evident. His words are as flexible as any words; the rhythm of some modulating air seems to move them into their place without a struggle by the poet, and almost without his knowledge. This is the perfection of pure art: to embody typical conceptions in the choicest, the fewest accidents; to embody them so that each of these accidents may produce its full effect, and so to embody them without effort.

The extreme opposite to this pure art is what may be called *ornate* art. This species of art aims also at giving a delineation of the typical idea in its perfection and its fullness, but it aims at so doing in a manner most different. It wishes to surround the type with the greatest number of circumstances which it will bear. It works not by choice and selection, but by accumulation and aggregation. The idea is not, as in the pure style, presented with the least clothing which it will endure, but with the richest and most involved clothing that it will admit.

*"The Isle."

Digitized by Google

We are fortunate in not having to hunt out of past literature an illustrative specimen of the ornate style. Mr. Tennyson has just given one, admirable in itself and most characteristic of the defects and the merits of this style. The story of "Enoch Arden," as he has enhanced and presented it, is a rich and splendid composit of imagery and illustration. Yet how simple that story is in itself! A sailor who sells fish breaks his leg, gets dismal, gives up selling fish, goes to sea, is wrecked on a desert island, stays there some years, on his return finds his wife married to a miller, speaks to a landlady on the subject, and dies. Told in the pure and simple, the unadorned and classical style, this story would not have taken three pages; but Mr. Tennyson has been able to make it the principal, the largest tale in his new volume. He has done so only by giving to every event and incident in the volume an accompanying commentary. He tells a great deal about the Torrid Zone, which a rough sailor like Enoch Arden certainly would not have perceived; and he gives to the fishing village, to which all the characters belong, a softness and a fascination which such villages scarcely possess in reality.

The description of the tropical island on which the sailor is thrown is an absolute model of adorned art:

"The mountain wooded to the peak, the lawns
And winding glades high up like ways to heaven,
The slender coco's drooping crown of plumes,
The lightning flash of insect and of bird,
The luster of the long convolvuluses
That coiled around the stately stems, and ran
Even to the limit of the land, the glows
And glories of the broad belt of the world, —
All these he saw; but what he fain had seen
He could not see, — the kindly human face,
Nor ever hear a kindly voice, but heard
The myriad shriek of wheeling ocean-fowl,
The league-long roller thundering on the reef,
The moving whisper of huge trees that branched
And blossomed in the zenith, or the sweep

Digitized by Google

Of some precipitous rivulet to the wave,
As down the shore he ranged, or all day long
Sat often in the seaward-gazing gorge,
A shipwrecked sailor, waiting for a sail:
No sail from day to day, but every day
The sunrise broken into scarlet shafts
Among the palms and ferns and precipices;
The blaze upon the waters to the east;
The blaze upon his island overhead;
The blaze upon the waters to the west;
Then the great stars that globed themselves in heaven,
The hollower-bellowing ocean, and again
The scarlet shafts of sunrise, — but no sail."

No expressive circumstances can be added to this description, no enhancing detail suggested. A much less happy instance is the description of Enoch's life before he sailed: —

"While Enoch was abroad on wrathful seas,
Or often journeying landward; for in truth
Enoch's white horse, and Enoch's ocean spoil
In ocean-smelling osier, and his face,
Rough-reddened with a thousand winter gales,
Not only to the market-cross were known,
But in the leafy lanes behind the down,
Far as the portal-warding lion-whelp
And peacock yew-tree of the lonely Hall,
Whose Friday fare was Enoch's minist'ring."

So much has not often been made of selling fish. The essence of ornate art is in this manner to accumulate round the typical object everything which can be said about it, every associated thought that can be connected with it, without impairing the essence of the delineation.

The first defect which strikes a student of ornate art — the first which arrests the mere reader of it — is what is called a want of simplicity. Nothing is described as it is; everything has about it an atmosphere of something else. The combined and associated thoughts, though they set off and heighten particular ideas and aspects of the central and typical

Digitized by Google

conception, yet complicate it: a simple thing—"a primrose by the river's brim"—is never left by itself; something else is put with it,—something not more connected with it than [the] "lion-whelp" and the "peacock yew-tree" are with the "fresh fish for sale" that Enoch carries past them. Even in the highest cases, ornate art leaves upon a cultured and delicate taste the conviction that it is not the highest art: that it is somehow excessive and over-rich; that it is not chaste in itself or chastening to the mind that sees it; that it is in an [un]explained manner unsatisfactory, "a thing in which we feel there is some hidden want!"

That want is a want of "definition." We must all know landscapes, river landscapes especially, which are in the highest sense beautiful, which when we first see them give us a delicate pleasure, which in some—and these the best—cases give even a gentle sense of surprise that such things should be so beautiful,—and yet when we come to live in them, to spend even a few hours in them, we seem stifled and oppressed. On the other hand, there are people to whom the sea-shore is a companion, an exhilaration; and not so much for the brawl of the shore as for the limited vastness, the finite infinite of the ocean as they see it. Such people often come home braced and nerved, and if they spoke out the truth, would have only to say, "We have seen the horizon line"; if they were let alone, indeed, they would gaze on it hour after hour, so great to them is the fascination, so full the sustaining calm, which they gain from that union of form and greatness. To a very inferior extent,—but still, perhaps, to an extent which most people understand better,—a common arch will have the same effect. A bridge completes a river landscape: if of the old and many-arched sort, it regulates by a long series of defined forms the vague outline of wood and river, which before had nothing to measure it; if of the new scientific sort, it introduces

Digitized by Google

still more strictly a geometrical element, — it stiffens the scenery, which was before too soft, too delicate, too vegetable. Just such is the effect of pure style in literary art: it calms by conciseness. While the ornate style leaves on the mind a mist of beauty, an excess of fascination, a complication of charm, the pure style leaves behind it the simple, defined, measured idea, as it is and by itself. That which is chaste chastens; there is a poised energy — a state half thrill and half tranquillity — which pure art gives, which no other can give; a pleasure justified as well as felt; an ennobled satisfaction at what ought to satisfy us, and must ennoble us.

Ornate art is to pure art what a painted statue is to an unpainted. It is impossible to deny that a touch of color does bring out certain parts, does convey certain expressions, does heighten certain features: but it leaves on the work as a whole a want, as we say, "of something," — a want of that inseparable chasteness which clings to simple sculpture; an impairing predominance of alluring details, which impairs our satisfaction with our own satisfaction, which makes us doubt whether a higher being than ourselves will be satisfied even though we are so. In the very same manner, though the rouge of ornate literature excites our eye, it also impairs our confidence.

Mr. Arnold has justly observed that this self-justifying, self-proving purity of style is commoner in ancient literature than in modern literature, and also that Shakespeare is not a great or an unmixed example of it. No one can say that he is. His works are full of undergrowth, are full of complexity, are not models of style; except by a miracle, nothing in the Elizabethan age could be a model of style: the restraining taste of that age was feebler and more mistaken than that of any other equally great age. Shakespeare's mind so teemed with creation that he required the most just, most forcible,

Digitized by Google

most constant restraint from without. He most needed to be guided among poets, and he was the least and worst guided. As a whole, no one can call his works finished models of the pure style, or of any style. But he has many passages of the most pure style; passages which could be easily cited if space served. And we must remember that the task which Shakespeare undertook was the most difficult which any poet has ever attempted, and that it is a task in which, after a million efforts, every other poet has failed. The Elizabethan drama—as Shakespeare has immortalized it—undertakes to delineate in five acts, under stage restrictions, and in mere dialogue, a whole list of *dramatis personæ*, a set of characters enough for a modern novel, and with the distinctness of a modern novel. Shakespeare is not content to give two or three great characters in solitude and in dignity, like the classical dramatists: he wishes to give a whole party of characters in the play of life, and according to the nature of each. He would "hold the mirror up to nature," not to catch a monarch in a tragic posture, but a whole group of characters engaged in many actions, intent on many purposes, thinking many thoughts. There is life enough, there is action enough, in single plays of Shakespeare to set up an ancient dramatist for a long career. And Shakespeare succeeded. His characters, taken *en masse* and as a whole, are as well known as any novelist's characters; cultivated men know all about them, as young ladies know all about Mr. Trollope's novels. But no other dramatist has succeeded in such an aim. No one else's characters are staple people in English literature, hereditary people whom every one knows all about in every generation. The contemporary dramatists—Beaumont and Fletcher, Ben Jonson, Marlowe, etc.—had many merits; some of them were great men. But a critic must say of them the worst thing he has to say: "They were men who failed in their

Digitized by Google

characteristic aim;" they attempted to describe numerous sets of complicated characters, and they failed. No one of such characters, or hardly one, lives in common memory; the "Faustus" of Marlowe, a really great idea, is not remembered. They undertook to write what they could not write,—five acts full of real characters; and in consequence, the fine individual things they conceived are forgotten by the mixed multitude, and known only to a few of the few. Of the Spanish theater we cannot speak; but there are no such characters in any French tragedy,—the whole aim of that tragedy forbade it. Goethe has added to literature a few great characters; he may be said almost to have added to literature the idea of "intellectual creation,"—the idea of describing the great characters through the intellect: but he has not added to the common stock what Shakespeare added,—a new multitude of men and women, and these not in simple attitudes, but amid the most complex parts of life, with all their various natures roused, mixed, and strained. The severest art must have allowed many details, much overflowing circumstance, to a poet who undertook to describe what almost defies description. Pure art would have commanded him to use details lavishly, for only by a multiplicity of such could the required effect have been at all produced. Shakespeare could accomplish it, for his mind was a spring, an inexhaustible fountain of human nature; and it is no wonder that, being compelled by the task of his time to let the fullness of his nature overflow, he sometimes let it overflow too much, and covered with erroneous conceits and superfluous images, characters and conceptions which would have been far more justly, far more effectually delineated with conciseness and simplicity. But there is an infinity of pure art in Shakespeare, although there is a great deal else also.

It will be said, If ornate art be, as you say, an inferior species of art, why should it ever be used?

Digitized by Google

If pure art be the best sort of art, why should it not always be used?

The reason is this: Literary art, as we just now explained, is concerned with literatesque characters in literatesque situations; and the *best* art is concerned with the *most* literatesque characters in the *most* literatesque situations. Such are the subjects of pure art; it embodies with the fewest touches, and under the most select and choice circumstances, the highest conceptions: but it does not follow that only the best subjects are to be treated by art, and then only in the very best way. Human nature could not endure such a critical commandment as that, and it would be an erroneous criticism which gave it. *Any* literatesque character may be described in literature under *any* circumstances which exhibit its literatesqueness.

The essence of pure art consists in its describing what is, as it is; and this is very well for what can bear it, but there are many inferior things which will not bear it and which nevertheless ought to be described in books. A certain kind of literature deals with illusions, and this kind of literature has given a coloring to the name "romantic." A man of rare genius, and even of poetical genius, has gone so far as to make these illusions the true subject of poetry — almost the sole subject: —

"Without," says Father Newman of one of his characters,* "being himself a poet, he was in the season of poetry, in the sweet springtime, when the year is most beautiful because it is new. Novelty was beauty to a heart so open and cheerful as his; not only because it was novelty, and had its proper charm as such, but because when we first see things we see them in a gay confusion, which is a principal element of the poetical. As time goes on, and we number and sort and measure things, — as we gain views, — we advance towards philosophy and truth, but we recede from poetry.

"When we ourselves were young, we once on a time walked on a hot summer day from Oxford to Newington, — a dull road, as any

* Charles Reding, in "Loss and Gain," Vol. i., Chap. iii.

Digitized by Google

one who has gone it knows, yet it was new to us: and we protest to you, reader, believe it or not, laugh or not, as you will, to us it seemed on that occasion quite touchingly beautiful; and a soft melancholy came over us, of which the shadows fall even now, when we look back on that dusty, weary journey. And why? because every object which met us was unknown and full of mystery. A tree or two in the distance seemed the beginning of a great wood or park, stretching endlessly; a hill implied a vale beyond, with that vale's history; the by-lanes, with their green hedges, wound and vanished, yet were not lost to the imagination. Such was our first journey: but when we had gone it several times, the mind refused to act, the scene ceased to enchant, stern reality alone remained; and we thought it one of the most tiresome, odious roads we ever had occasion to traverse."

That is to say, that the function of the poet is to introduce a "gay confusion," a rich medley which does not exist in the actual world,—which perhaps could not exist in any world,—but which would seem pretty if it did exist. Every one who reads "Enoch Arden" will perceive that this notion of all poetry is exactly applicable to this one poem. Whatever be made of Enoch's "ocean-spoil in ocean-smelling osier," of the "portal-warding lion-whelp" and the "peacock yew-tree," every one knows that in himself Enoch could not have been charming. People who sell fish about the country (and that is what he did, though Mr. Tennyson won't speak out, and wraps it up) never are beautiful. As Enoch was and must be coarse, in itself the poem must depend for a charm on a "gay confusion,"—on a splendid accumulation of impossible accessories.

Mr. Tennyson knows this better than many of us. He knows the country world; he has proved that no one living knows it better: he has painted with pure art—with art which describes what is a race perhaps more refined, more delicate, more conscientious, than the sailor—the "Northern Farmer," and we all know what a splendid, what a living thing he has made of it. He could, if he only would, have given us the ideal sailor in like manner; the ideal of the natural sailor, we mean,—the characteristic present

Digitized by Google

man as he lives and is. But this he has not chosen. He has endeavored to describe an exceptional sailor, at an exceptionally refined port, performing a graceful act, an act of relinquishment. And with this task before him, his profound taste taught him that ornate art was a necessary medium — was the sole effectual instrument — for his purpose. It was necessary for him, if possible, to abstract the mind from reality; to induce us *not* to conceive or think of sailors as they are while we are reading of his sailors, but to think of what a person who did not know might fancy sailors to be. A casual traveler on the sea-shore, with the sensitive mood and the romantic imagination Dr. Newman has described, might fancy — would fancy — a seafaring village to be like that. Accordingly, Mr. Tennyson has made it his aim to call off the stress of fancy from real life, to occupy it otherwise, to bury it with pretty accessories; to engage it on the "peacock yew-tree" and the "portal-warding lion-whelp." Nothing, too, can be more splendid than the description of the Tropics as Mr. Tennyson delineates them; but a sailor would not have felt the Tropics in that manner. The beauties of nature would not have so much occupied him. He would have known little of the "scarlet shafts of sunrise," and nothing of the "long convolvuluses." As in "Robinson Crusoe," his own petty contrivances and his small ailments would have been the principal subject to him. "For three years," he might have said, "my back was bad; and then I put two pegs into a piece of drift-wood, and so made a chair; and after that it pleased God to send me a chill." In real life his piety would scarcely have gone beyond that.

It will indeed be said that though the sailor had no words for, and even no explicit consciousness of, the splendid details of the Torrid Zone, yet that he had notwithstanding a dim latent inexpressible conception of them; though he could not speak of them or describe them, yet they were much to him. And

Digitized by Google

doubtless such is the case. Rude people are impressed by what is beautiful,—deeply impressed,—though they could not describe what they see or what they feel. But what is absurd in Mr. Tennyson's description—absurd when we abstract it from the gorgeous additions and ornaments with which Mr. Tennyson distracts us—is, that his hero feels nothing else but these great splendors. We hear nothing of the physical ailments, the rough devices, the low superstitions, which really would have been the *first* things, the favorite and principal occupations of his mind. Just so, when he gets home he *may* have had such fine sentiments, though it is odd; and he *may* have spoken of them to his landlady, though that is odder still: but it is incredible that his whole mind should be made up of fine sentiments. Beside those sweet feelings, if he had them, there must have been many more obvious, more prosaic, and some perhaps more healthy. Mr. Tennyson has shown a profound judgment in distracting us as he does. He has given us a classic delineation of the "Northern Farmer" with no ornament at all,—as bare a thing as can be,—because he then wanted to describe a true type of real men; he has given us a sailor crowded all over with ornament and illustration, because he then wanted to describe an unreal type of fancied men,—not sailors as they are, but sailors as they might be wished.

Another prominent element in "Enoch Arden" is yet more suitable to, yet more requires the aid of, ornate art. Mr. Tennyson undertook to deal with *half-belief*. The presentiments which Annie feels are exactly of that sort which everybody has felt, and which every one has half believed,—which hardly any one has more than half believed. Almost every one, it has been said, would be angry if any one else reported that he believed in ghosts; yet hardly any one, when thinking by himself, wholly disbelieves them. Just so, such presentiments as Mr. Tennyson depicts impress the inner mind so much that the outer

Digitized by Google

mind — the rational understanding — hardly likes to consider them nicely or to discuss them skeptically. For these dubious themes an ornate or complex style is needful. Classical art speaks out what it has to say plainly and simply. Pure style cannot hesitate: it describes in concisest outline what is, as it is. If a poet really believes in presentiments, he can speak out in pure style. One who could have been a poet — one of the few in any age of whom one can say certainly that they could have been and have not been — has spoken thus: —

"When Heaven sends sorrow,
Warnings go first,
Lest it should burst
With stunning might
On souls too bright
To fear the morrow.

"Can science bear us
To the hid springs
Of human things?
Why may not dream,
Or thought's day-gleam,
Startle, yet cheer us?

"Are such thoughts fetters,
While faith disowns
Dread of earth's tones,
Recks but Heaven's call,
And on the wall
Reads but Heaven's letters?"*

But if a poet is not sure whether presentiments are true or not true; if he wishes to leave his readers in doubt; if he wishes an atmosphere of indistinct illusion and of moving shadow, — he must use the romantic style; the style of miscellaneous adjunct; the style "which shirks, not meets" your intellect; the style which, as you are scrutinizing, disappears.

Nor is this all, or even the principal lesson, which "Enoch Arden" may suggest to us, of the use of

* John Henry Newman's "Warnings."

Digitized by Google

ornate art. That art is the appropriate art for an *unpleasing type.* Many of the characters of real life, if brought distinctly, prominently, and plainly before the mind as they really are,—if shown in their inner nature, their actual essence,—are doubtless very unpleasant. They would be horrid to meet and horrid to think of. We fear it must be owned that Enoch Arden is this kind of person. A dirty sailor who did *not* go home to his wife is not an agreeable being: a varnish must be put on him to make him shine. It is true that he acts rightly; that he is very good. But such is human nature that it finds a little tameness in mere morality. Mere virtue belongs to a charity schoolgirl, and has a taint of the catechism. All of us feel this, though most of us are too timid, too scrupulous, too anxious about the virtue of others, to speak out. We are ashamed of our nature in this respect, but it is not the less our nature. And if we look deeper into the matter, there are many reasons why we should not be ashamed of it. The soul of man—and as we necessarily believe, of beings greater than man—has many parts beside its moral part. It has an intellectual part, an artistic part, even a religious part, in which mere morals have no share. In Shakespeare or Goethe, even in Newton or Archimedes, there is much which will not be cut down to the shape of the Commandments. They have thoughts, feelings, hopes—immortal thoughts and hopes—which have influenced the life of men and the souls of men ever since their age, but which the "whole duty of man," the ethical compendium, does not recognize. Nothing is more unpleasant than a virtuous person with a mean mind. A highly developed moral nature joined to an undeveloped intellectual nature, an undeveloped artistic nature, and a very limited religious nature, is of necessity repulsive. It represents a bit of human nature—a good bit, of course, but a bit only—in disproportionate, unnatural, and revolting prominence; and therefore, unless an

Digitized by Google

artist use delicate care, we are offended. The dismal act of a squalid man needed many condiments to make it pleasant, and therefore Mr. Tennyson was right to mix them subtly and to use them freely.

A mere act of self-denial can indeed scarcely be pleasant upon paper. A heroic struggle with an external adversary, even though it end in a defeat, may easily be made attractive. Human nature likes to see itself look grand, and it looks grand when it is making a brave struggle with foreign foes. But it does not look grand when it is divided against itself. An excellent person striving with temptation is a very admirable being in reality, but he is not a pleasant being in description. We hope he will win, and overcome his temptation; but we feel that he would be a more interesting being, a higher being, if he had not felt that temptation so much. The poet must make the struggle great in order to make the self-denial virtuous; and if the struggle be too great, we are apt to feel some mixture of contempt. The internal metaphysics of a divided nature are but an inferior subject for art; and if they are to be made attractive, much else must be combined with them. If the excellence of "Hamlet" had depended on the ethical qualities of Hamlet, it would not have been the masterpiece of our literature. He acts virtuously, of course, and kills the people he ought to kill; but Shakespeare knew that such goodness would not much interest the pit. He made him a handsome prince, and a puzzling meditative character; these secular qualities relieve his moral excellence, and so he becomes "nice." In proportion as an artist has to deal with types essentially imperfect, he must disguise their imperfections; he must accumulate around them as many first-rate accessories as may make his readers forget that they are themselves second-rate. The sudden millionaires of the present day hope to disguise their social defects by buying old places and hiding among aristocratic furniture; just so, a great

Digitized by Google

artist who has to deal with characters artistically imperfect will use an ornate style, will fit them into a scene where there is much else to look at.

For these reasons, ornate art is, within the limits, as legitimate as pure art. It does what pure art could not do. The very excellence of pure art confines its employment. Precisely because it gives the best things by themselves and exactly as they are, it fails when it is necessary to describe inferior things among other things, with a list of enhancements and a crowd of accompaniments that in reality do not belong to it. Illusion, half-belief, unpleasant types, imperfect types, are as much the proper sphere of ornate art as an inferior landscape is the proper sphere for the true efficacy of moonlight. A really great landscape needs sunlight and bears sunlight: but moonlight is an equalizer of beauties; it gives a romantic unreality to what will not stand the bare truth. And just so does romantic art.

There is, however, a third kind of art which differs from these on the point in which they most resemble one another. Ornate art and pure art have this in common, that they paint the types of literature in a form as perfect as they can. Ornate art, indeed, uses undue disguises and unreal enhancements; it does not confine itself to the best types,—on the contrary, it is its office to make the best of imperfect types and lame approximations: but ornate art, as much as pure art, catches its subject in the best light it can, takes the most developed aspect of it which it can find, and throws upon it the most congruous colors it can use. But *grotesque* art does just the contrary. It takes the type, so to say, *in difficulties.* It gives a representation of it in its minimum development, amid the circumstances least favorable to it, just while it is struggling with obstacles, just where it is encumbered with incongruities. It deals, to use the language of science, not with normal types but with abnormal specimens; to use the language of old

Digitized by Google

philosophy, not with what nature is striving to be, but with what by some lapse she has happened to become.

This art works by contrast. It enables you to see, it makes you see, the perfect type by painting the opposite deviation. It shows you what ought to be by what ought not to be; when complete, it reminds you of the perfect image by showing you the distorted and imperfect image. Of this art we possess in the present generation one prolific master. Mr. Browning is an artist working by incongruity. Possibly hardly one of his most considerable efforts can be found which is not great because of its odd mixture. He puts together things which no one else would have put together, and produces on our minds a result which no one else would have produced or tried to produce. His admirers may not like all we may have to say of him. But in our way we too are among his admirers. No one ever read him without seeing not only his great ability, but his great *mind*. He not only possesses superficial usable talents, but the strong something, the inner secret something, which uses them and controls them; he is great not in mere accomplishments, but in himself. He has applied a hard strong intellect to real life; he has applied the same intellect to the problems of his age. He has striven to know what *is;* he has endeavored not to be cheated by counterfeits, not to be infatuated with illusions. His heart is in what he says. He has battered his brain against his creed till he believes it. He has accomplishments too, the more effective because they are mixed. He is at once a student of mysticism and a citizen of the world. He brings to the club sofa distinct visions of old creeds, intense images of strange thoughts; he takes to the bookish student tidings of wild Bohemia and little traces of the *demi-monde*. He puts down what is good for the naughty, and what is naughty for the good. Over women his easier writings exercise that imperious power which belongs to the writings of a great man

Digitized by Google

of the world upon such matters. He knows women, and therefore they wish to know him. If we blame many of Browning's efforts, it is in the interest of art, and not from a wish to hurt or degrade him.

If we wanted to illustrate the nature of grotesque art by an exaggerated instance, we should have selected a poem which the chance of late publication brings us in this new volume. Mr. Browning has undertaken to describe what may be called *mind in difficulties*,— mind set to make out the universe under the worst and hardest circumstances. He takes Caliban,— not perhaps exactly Shakespeare's Caliban, but an analogous and worse creature; a strong thinking power, but a nasty creature,— a gross animal, uncontrolled and unelevated by any feeling of religion or duty. The delineation of him will show that Mr. Browning does not wish to take undue advantage of his readers by a choice of nice subjects:—

"'Will sprawl, now that the heat of day is best,
Flat on his belly in the pit's much mire,
With elbows wide, fists clenched to prop his chin;
And while he kicks both feet in the cool slush,
And feels about his spine small eft-things course,
Run in and out each arm, and make him laugh;
And while above his head a pompion plant,
Coating the cave-top as a brow its eye,
Creeps down to touch and tickle hair and beard,
And now a flower drops with a bee inside,
And now a fruit to snap at, catch, and crunch."

This pleasant creature proceeds to give his idea of the origin of the universe, and it is as follows. Caliban speaks in the third person, and is of opinion that the Maker of the universe took to making it on account of his personal discomfort:—

"Setebos, Setebos, and Setebos!
'Thinketh, he dwelleth i' the cold o' the moon.

"'Thinketh he made it, with the sun to match,
But not the stars,— the stars came otherwise:
Only made clouds, winds, meteors, such as that;

Digitized by Google

Also this isle, what lives and grows thereon,
And snaky sea which rounds and ends the same.

"'Thinketh, it came of being ill at ease:
He hated that he cannot change his cold,
Nor cure its ache. 'Hath spied an icy fish
That longed to 'scape the rock-stream where she lived,
And thaw herself within the lukewarm brine
O' the lazy sea her stream thrusts far amid,
A crystal spike 'twixt two warm walls of wave;
Only she ever sickened, found repulse
At the other kind of water, not her life,
(Green-dense and dim-delicious, bred o' the sun,)
Flounced back from bliss she was not born to breathe.
And in her old bounds buried her despair,
Hating and loving warmth alike: so he.

"'Thinketh, he made thereat the sun, this isle,
Trees and the fowls here, beast and creeping thing.
Yon otter, sleek-wet, black, lithe as a leech;
Yon auk, one fire-eye in a ball of foam,
That floats and feeds; a certain badger brown
He hath watched hunt with that slant white-wedge eye
By moonlight; and the pie with the long tongue
That pricks deep into oakwarts for a worm,
And says a plain word when she finds her prize,
But will not eat the ants; the ants themselves,
That build a wall of seeds and settled stalks
About their hole,—he made all these and more,
Made all we see, and us, in spite: how else?"

It may seem, perhaps, to most readers that these lines are very difficult, and that they are unpleasant. And so they are. We quote them to illustrate, not the *success* of grotesque art, but the *nature* of grotesque art. It shows the end at which this species of art aims, and if it fails it is from over-boldness in the choice of a subject by the artist, or from the defects of its execution. A thinking faculty more in difficulties,—a great type,—an inquisitive, searching intellect under more disagreeable conditions, with worse helps, more likely to find falsehood, less likely to find truth, can scarcely be imagined. Nor is the

Digitized by Google

mere description of the thought at all bad: on the contrary, if we closely examine it, it is very clever. Hardly any one could have amassed so many ideas at once nasty and suitable. But scarcely any readers —any casual readers—who are not of the sect of Mr. Browning's admirers will be able to examine it enough to appreciate it. From a defect, partly of subject and partly of style, many of Mr. Browning's works make a demand upon the reader's zeal and sense of duty to which the nature of most readers is unequal. They have on the turf the convenient expression "staying power": some horses can hold on and others cannot. But hardly any reader not of especial and peculiar nature can hold on through such composition. There is not enough of "staying power" in human nature. One of his greatest admirers once owned to us that he seldom or never began a new poem without looking on in advance, and foreseeing with caution what length of intellectual adventure he was about to commence. Whoever will work hard at such poems will find much mind in them: they are a sort of quarry of ideas; but whoever goes there will find these ideas in such a jagged, ugly, useless shape that he can hardly bear them.

We are not judging Mr. Browning simply from a hasty recent production. All poets are liable to misconceptions; and if such a piece as "Caliban upon Setebos" were an isolated error, a venial and particular exception, we should have given it no prominence. We have put it forward because it just elucidates both our subject and the characteristics of Mr. Browning. But many other of his best known pieces do so almost equally; what several of his devotees think his best piece is quite enough illustrative for anything we want. It appears that on Holy Cross Day at Rome the Jews were obliged to listen to a Christian sermon, in the hope of their conversion; though this is, according to Mr. Browning, what they really said when they came away:—

Digitized by Google

"Fee, faw, fum! bubble and squeak!
Blessedest Thursday's the fat of the week.
Rumble and tumble, sleek and rough,
Stinking and savory, smug and gruff,
Take the church-road, for the bell's due chime
Gives us the summons—'tis sermon-time.

"Boh, here's Barnabas! Job, that's you?
Up stumps Solomon—bustling too?
Shame, man! greedy beyond your years
To handsel the bishop's shaving-shears?
Fair play's a jewel! leave friends in the lurch?
Stand on a line ere you start for the church.

"Higgledy-piggledy, packed we lie,
Rats in a hamper, swine in a sty,
Wasps in a bottle, frogs in a sieve,
Worms in a carcase, fleas in a sleeve.
Hist! square shoulders, settle your thumbs
And buzz for the bishop—here he comes."

And after similar nice remarks for a church, the edified congregation concludes:—

"But now, while the scapegoats leave our flock,
And the rest sit silent and count the clock,
Since forced to muse the appointed time
On these precious facts and truths sublime,—
Let us fitly employ it, under our breath,
In saying Ben Ezra's 'Song of Death.'

"For Rabbi Ben Ezra, the night he died,
Called sons and sons' sons to his side,
And spoke:—'This world has been harsh and strange;
Something is wrong: there needeth a change.
But what, or where? at the last, or first?
In one point only we sinned, at worst.

"'The Lord will have mercy on Jacob yet,
And again in his border see Israel set.
When Judah beholds Jerusalem,
The stranger-seed shall be joined to them:
To Jacob's House shall the Gentiles cleave.
So the Prophet saith, and his sons believe.

Digitized by Google

"'Ah, the children of the chosen race
Shall carry and bring them to their place;
In the land of the Lord shall lead the same,
Bondsmen and handmaids. Who shall blame,
When the slave enslave, the oppressed ones o'er
The oppressor triumph forevermore?

"'God spoke, and gave us the word to keep;
Bade never fold the hands nor sleep
'Mid a faithless world,—at watch and ward,
Till the Christ at the end relieve our guard.
By his servant Moses the watch was set:
Though near upon cock-crow, we keep it yet.

"'Thou! if thou wast He who at mid-watch came,
By the starlight naming a dubious Name!
And if we were too heavy with sleep, too rash
With fear,—O Thou, if that martyr-gash
Fell on thee coming to take thine own,
And we gave the Cross, when we owed the Throne,—

"'Thou art the Judge. We are bruised thus.
But, the judgment over, join sides with us!
Thine too is the cause! and not more thine
Than ours is the work of these dogs and swine,
Whose life laughs through and spits at their creed,
Who maintain thee in word and defy thee in deed!

"'We withstood Christ then? be mindful how
At least we withstand Barabbas now!
Was our outrage sore? but the worst we spared,
To have called these—Christians, had we dared!
Let defiance to them pay mistrust of thee,
And Rome make amends for Calvary!

"'By the torture, prolonged from age to age,
By the infamy, Israel's heritage,
By the Ghetto's plague, by the garb's disgrace,
By the badge of shame, by the felon's place,
By the branding-tool, the bloody whip,
And the summons to Christian fellowship,—

"'We boast our proof that at least the Jew
Would wrest Christ's name from the Devil's crew.

Digitized by Google

Thy face took never so deep a shade
But we fought them in it, God our aid!
A trophy to bear, as we march, a band
South, east, and on to the Pleasant Land!'"

It is very natural that a poet whose wishes incline or whose genius conducts him to a grotesque art should be attracted towards mediæval subjects. There is no age whose legends are so full of grotesque subjects, and no age whose real life was so fit to suggest them. Then, more than at any other time, good principles have been under great hardships. The vestiges of ancient civilization, the germs of modern civilization, the little remains of what had been, the small beginnings of what is, were buried under a cumbrous mass of barbarism and cruelty. Good elements hidden in horrid accompaniments are the special theme of grotesque art; and these, mediæval life and legends afford more copiously than could have been furnished before Christianity gave its new elements of good, or since modern civilization has removed some few at least of the old elements of destruction. A *buried* life like the spiritual mediæval was Mr. Browning's natural element, and he was right to be attracted by it. His mistake has been, that he has not made it pleasant: that he has forced his art to topics on which no one could charm, or on which he at any rate could not; that on these occasions and in these poems he has failed in fascinating men and women of sane taste.

We say "sane" because there is a most formidable and estimable *insane* taste. The will has great though indirect power over the taste, just as it has over the belief. There are some horrid beliefs from which human nature revolts, from which at first it shrinks, to which at first no effort can force it. But if we fix the mind upon them, they have a power over us just because of their natural offensiveness. They are like the sight of human blood: experienced soldiers tell us that at first, men are sickened by the smell and

Digitized by Google

newness of blood almost to death and fainting; but that as soon as they harden their hearts and stiffen their minds, as soon as they *will* bear it, then comes an appetite for slaughter, a tendency to gloat on carnage, to love blood (at least for the moment) with a deep, eager love. It is a principle that if we put down a healthy instinctive aversion, nature avenges herself by creating an unhealthy insane attraction. For this reason, the most earnest truth-seeking men fall into the worst delusions. They will not let their mind alone; they force it towards some ugly thing, which a crotchet of argument, a conceit of intellect recommends: and nature punishes their disregard of her warning by subjection to the ugly one, by belief in it. Just so, the most industrious critics get the most admiration. They think it unjust to rest in their instinctive natural horror; they overcome it, and angry nature gives them over to ugly poems and marries them to detestable stanzas.

Mr. Browning possibly, and some of the worst of Mr. Browning's admirers certainly, will say that these grotesque objects exist in real life, and therefore they ought to be, at least may be, described in art. But though pleasure is not the end of poetry, pleasing is a condition of poetry. An exceptional monstrosity of horrid ugliness cannot be made pleasing, except it be made to suggest — to recall — the perfection, the beauty, from which it is a deviation. Perhaps in extreme cases no art is equal to this: but then such self-imposed problems should not be worked by the artist; these out-of-the-way and detestable subjects should be let alone by him. It is rather characteristic of Mr. Browning to neglect this rule. He is the most of a realist, and the least of an idealist, of any poet we know. He evidently sympathizes with some part at least of "Bishop Blougram's Apology." Anyhow this world exists. "There *is* good wine; there *are* pretty women; there *are* comfortable benefices; there *is* money, and it is pleasant to spend it. Accept the creed of your age and you get

Digitized by Google

these, reject that creed and you lose them. And for what do you lose them? For a fancy creed of your own, which no one else will accept, which hardly any one will call a 'creed,' which most people will consider a sort of unbelief." Again, Mr. Browning evidently loves what we may call the "realism," the grotesque realism, of orthodox Christianity. Many parts of it in which great divines have felt keen difficulties are quite pleasant to him. He must *see* his religion, he must have an "object-lesson" in believing. He must have a creed that will *take*, which wins and holds the miscellaneous world, which stout men will heed, which nice women will adore. The spare moments of solitary religion, the "obstinate questionings," the "high instincts," the "first affections," the "shadowy recollections,"

> "Which, be they what they may,
> Are yet the fountain-light of all our day,
> Are yet a master-light of all our seeing,"*

the great but vague faith, the unutterable tenets, —seem to him worthless, visionary: they are not enough "immersed in matter"†; they move about "in worlds not realized." We wish he could be tried like the prophet once: he would have found God in the earthquake and the storm; he would have deciphered from them a bracing and a rough religion; he would have known that crude men and ignorant women felt them too, and he would accordingly have trusted them: but he would have distrusted and disregarded the "still small voice"; he would have said it was "fancy,"—a thing you thought you heard to-day, but were not sure you had heard to-morrow; he would call it a nice illusion, an immaterial prettiness; he would ask triumphantly, "How are you to get the mass of men to heed this little thing?" he would have persevered, and insisted, "*My wife* does not hear it."

* Wordsworth, "Intimations of Immortality," ix.

† "Locke on the Human Understanding," Book iv., Chap. iii., i. 2.

Digitized by Google

But although a suspicion of beauty, and a taste for ugly reality, have led Mr. Browning to exaggerate the functions and to caricature the nature of grotesque art, we own — or rather we maintain — that he has given many excellent specimens of that art within its proper boundaries and limits. Take an example, his picture of what we may call the *bourgeois* nature in *difficulties;* in the utmost difficulty, in contact with magic and the supernatural. He has made of it something homely, comic, true; reminding us of what *bourgeois* nature really is. By showing us the type under abnormal conditions, he reminds us of the type under its best and most satisfactory conditions:

"Hamelin town's in Brunswick,
By famous Hanover city;
The river Weser, deep and wide,
Washes its wall on the southern side;
A pleasanter spot you never spied:
But when begins my ditty,
Almost five hundred years ago,
To see the townsfolk suffer so
From vermin was a pity.

"Rats!
They fought the dogs, and killed the cats,
And bit the babies in the cradles,
And ate the cheeses out of the vats,
And licked the soup from the cook's own ladles,
Split open the kegs of salted sprats,
Made nests inside men's Sunday hats,
And even spoiled the women's chats,
By drowning their speaking
With shrieking and squeaking
In fifty different sharps and flats.

"At last the people in a body
To the town hall came flocking:
'Tis clear,' cried they, 'our mayor's a noddy;
And as for our corporation,—shocking
To think we buy gowns lined with ermine
For dolts that can't or won't determine
What's best to rid us of our vermin!

Digitized by Google

You hope, because you're old and obese,
To find in the furry civic robe ease?
Rouse up, sirs! Give your brains a racking
To find the remedy we're lacking,
Or, sure as fate, we'll send you packing!'
At this the mayor and corporation
Quaked with a mighty consternation."

A person of musical abilities proposes to extricate the civic dignitaries from the difficulty, and they promise him a thousand guilders if he does:—

"Into the street the Piper stept,
Smiling first a little smile,
As if he knew what magic slept
In his quiet pipe the while;
Then, like a musical adept,
To blow the pipe his lips he wrinkled,
And green and blue his sharp eye twinkled
Like a candle flame where salt is sprinkled;
And ere three shrill notes the pipe uttered,
You heard as if an army muttered;
And the muttering grew to a grumbling;
And the grumbling grew to a mighty rumbling;
And out of the houses the rats came tumbling:
Great rats, small rats, lean rats, brawny rats,
Brown rats, black rats, gray rats, tawny rats,
Grave old plodders, gay young friskers,
Fathers, mothers, uncles, cousins,
Cocking tails and pricking whiskers,
Families by tens and dozens,
Brothers, sisters, husbands, wives,—
Followed the Piper for their lives.
From street to street he piped advancing,
And step for step they followed dancing,
Until they came to the river Weser,
Wherein all plunged and perished!—
Save one who, stout as Julius Cæsar,
Swam across and lived to carry
(As he, the manuscript he cherished)
To Rat-land home his commentary:
Which was, 'At the first shrill notes of the pipe,
I heard a sound as of scraping tripe,
And putting apples, wondrous ripe,
Into a cider-press's gripe;

Digitized by Google

And a moving away of pickle-tub boards,
And a leaving ajar of conserve cupboards,
And a drawing the corks of train-oil flasks,
And a breaking the hoops of butter casks:
And it seemed as if a voice
(Sweeter far than by harp or by psaltery
Is breathed) called out, "O rats, rejoice!
The world is grown to one vast drysaltery!
So munch on, crunch on, take your nuncheon,
Breakfast, supper, dinner, luncheon!"
And just as a bulky sugar puncheon,
All ready staved, like a great sun shone
Glorious scarce an inch before me,
Just as methought it said, "Come, bore me!"—
I found the Weser rolling o'er me.'

"You should have heard the Hamelin people
Ringing the bells till they rocked the steeple.
'Go,' cried the mayor, 'and get long poles,
Poke out the nests and block up the holes!
Consult with carpenters and builders,
And leave in our town not even a trace
Of the rats!'—when suddenly, up the face
Of the Piper perked in the market-place,
With a 'First, if you please, my thousand guilders!'

"A thousand guilders! The mayor looked blue;
So did the corporation too.
For council dinners made rare havoc
With Claret, Moselle, Vin-de-Grave, Hock;
And half the money would replenish
Their cellar's biggest butt with Rhenish.
To pay this sum to a wandering fellow
With a gipsy coat of red and yellow!
'Beside,' quoth the mayor with a knowing wink,
'Our business was done at the river's brink:
We saw with our eyes the vermin sink,
And what's dead can't come to life, I think.
So, friend, we're not the folks to shrink
From the duty of giving you something for drink,
And a matter of money to put in your poke;
But as for the guilders, what we spoke
Of them, as you very well know, was in joke.

Digitized by Google

Beside, our losses have made us thrifty.
A thousand guilders! Come, take fifty!'

"The Piper's face fell, and he cried,
'No trifling! I can't wait, beside!
I've promised to visit by dinner-time
Bagdat, and accept the prime
Of the head-cook's pottage, all he's rich in,
For having left, in the Caliph's kitchen,
Of a nest of scorpions no survivor;
With him I proved no bargain-driver, —
With you, don't think I'll bate a stiver!
And folks who put me in a passion
May find me pipe to another fashion.'

"'How!' cried the mayor, 'd'ye think I'll brook
Being worse treated than a cook?
Insulted by a lazy ribald
With idle pipe and vesture piebald?
You threaten us, fellow? Do your worst,
Blow your pipe there till you burst!'

"Once more he stept into the street,
And to his lips again
Laid his long pipe of smooth straight cane;
And ere he blew three notes (such sweet
Soft notes as yet musician's cunning
Never gave the enraptured air),
There was a rustling that seemed like a bustling
Of merry crowds justling at pitching and hustling:
Small feet were pattering, wooden shoes clattering,
Little hands clapping and little tongues chattering,
And like fowls in a farm-yard when barley is scattering,
Out came the children running.
All the little boys and girls,
With rosy cheeks and flaxen curls,
And sparkling eyes and teeth like pearls,
Tripping and skipping, ran merrily after
The wonderful music with shouting and laughter.
. . . . . .

"And I must not omit to say
That in Transylvania there's a tribe
Of alien people that ascribe
The outlandish ways and dress

Digitized by Google

On which their neighbors lay such stress,
To their fathers and mothers having risen
Out of some subterraneous prison
Into which they were trepanned
Long time ago in a mighty band
Out of Hamelin town in Brunswick land,
But how or why they don't understand."

Something more we had to say of Mr. Browning, but we must stop. It is singularly characteristic of this age that the poems which rise to the surface should be examples of ornate art and grotesque art, not of pure art. We live in the realm of the *half*-educated. The number of readers grows daily, but the quality of readers does not improve rapidly. The middle class is scattered, headless; it is well-meaning, but aimless: wishing to be wise, but ignorant how to be wise. The aristocracy of England never was a literary aristocracy; never even in the days of its full power, of its unquestioned predominance, did it guide—did it even seriously try to guide—the taste of England. Without guidance, young men and tired men are thrown amongst a mass of books; they have to choose which they like. Many of them would much like to improve their culture, to chasten their taste, if they knew how: but left to themselves, they take not pure art, but showy art; not that which permanently relieves the eye, and makes it happy whenever it looks and as long as it looks, but *glaring* art, which catches and arrests the eye for a moment, but which in the end fatigues it. But before the wholesome remedy of nature—the fatigue—arrives, the hasty reader has passed on to some new excitement, which in its turn stimulates for an instant and then is passed by for ever. These conditions are not favorable to the due appreciation of pure art,—of that art which must be known before it is admired, which must have fastened irrevocably on the brain before you appreciate it, which you must love ere it will seem worthy of your love.

Digitized by Google

Women, too, whose voice in literature counts as well as that of men, and in a light literature counts for more than that of men,—women, such as we know them, such as they are likely to be, ever prefer a delicate unreality to a true or firm art. A dressy literature, an exaggerated literature, seem to be fated to us. These are our curses, as other times had theirs.

"And yet
Think not the living times forget.
Ages of heroes fought and fell,
That Homer in the end might tell;
O'er groveling generations past
Upstood the Doric fane at last;
And countless hearts on countless years
Had wasted thoughts and hopes and fears,
Rude laughter and unmeaning tears,
Ere England Shakespeare saw, or Rome
The pure perfection of her dome.
Others, I doubt not, if not we,
The issue of our toils shall see;
Young children gather as their own
The harvest that the dead had sown,
The dead forgotten and unknown."*

* Arthur Hugh Clough. ("Come, Poet, Come!")

Digitized by Google

*SHAKESPEARE — THE MAN.**

(1853.)

THE greatest of English poets, it is often said, is but a name. "No letter of his writing, no record of his conversation, no character of him drawn with any fullness by a contemporary," have been extracted by antiquaries from the piles of rubbish which they have sifted. Yet of no person is there a clearer picture in the popular fancy. You seem to have known Shakespeare, to have seen Shakespeare, to have been friends with Shakespeare. We would attempt a slight delineation of the popular idea which has been formed: not from loose tradition or remote research, not from what some one says some one else said that the poet said, but from data which are at least undoubted,—from the sure testimony of his certain works.

Some extreme skeptics, we know, doubt whether it is possible to deduce anything as to an author's character from his works. Yet surely people do not keep a tame steam-engine to write their books: and if those books were really written by a man, he must have been a man who could write them; he must have had the thoughts which they express, have acquired the knowledge they contain, have possessed the style in which we read them. The difficulty is a defect of the critics. A person who knows nothing of an

* Shakespeare et son Temps: Étude Littéraire. Par M. Guizot. Paris. 1852.

Notes and Emendations to the Text of Shakespeare's Plays from early Manuscript Corrections in a Copy of the Folio, 1632, in the possession of R. Payne Collier, Esq., F. S. A. London. 1853.

Digitized by Google

author he has read will not know much of an author whom he has seen.

First of all, it may be said that Shakespeare's works could only be produced by a first-rate imagination working on a first-rate experience. It is often difficult to make out whether the author of a poetic creation is drawing from fancy or drawing from experience; but for art on a certain scale, the two must concur. Out of nothing, nothing can be created. Some plastic power is required, however great may be the material. And when such a work as "Hamlet" or "Othello"—still more, when both of them and others not unequal have been created by a single mind, it may be fairly said that not only a great imagination, but a full conversancy with the world, was necessary to their production. The whole powers of man, under the most favorable circumstances, are not too great for such an effort. We may assume that Shakespeare had a great experience.

To a great experience one thing is essential,—an experiencing nature. It is not enough to have opportunity, it is essential to feel it. Some occasions come to all men; but to many they are of little use, and to some they are none. What, for example, has experience done for the distinguished Frenchman the name of whose essay is prefixed to this paper? M. Guizot is the same man that he was in 1820, or, we believe, as he was in 1814. Take up one of his lectures published before he was a practical statesman: you will be struck with the width of view, the amplitude and the solidity of the reflections; you will be amazed that a mere literary teacher could produce anything so wise: but take up afterwards an essay published since his fall, and you will be amazed to find no more. Napoleon I. is come and gone, the Bourbons of the old *régime* have come and gone, the Bourbons of the new *régime* have had their turn. M. Guizot has been first minister of a citizen king; he has led a great party; he has pronounced many a great *discours*

Digitized by Google

that was well received by the second elective assembly in the world. But there is no trace of this in his writings. No one would guess from them that their author had ever left the professor's chair. It is the same, we are told, with small matters: when M. Guizot walks the street, he seems to see nothing; the head is thrown back, the eye fixed, and the mouth working. His mind is no doubt at work, but it is not stirred by what is external. Perhaps it is the internal activity of mind that overmasters the perceptive power. Anyhow, there might have been an *émeute* in the street and he would not have known it; there have been revolutions in his life and he is scarcely the wiser. Among the most frivolous and fickle of civilized nations he is alone. They pass from the game of war to the game of peace, from the game of science to the game of art, from the game of liberty to the game of slavery, from the game of slavery to the game of license; he stands like a schoolmaster in the play-ground, without sport and without pleasure, firm and sullen, slow and awful.

A man of this sort is a curious mental phenomenon. He appears to get early — perhaps to be born with — a kind of dry schedule or catalogue of the universe; he has a ledger in his head, and has a title to which he can refer any transaction; nothing puzzles him, nothing comes amiss to him, but he is not in the least the wiser for anything. Like the bookkeeper, he has his heads of account, and he knows them, but he is no wiser for the particular items. After a busy day and after a slow day, after a few entries and after many, his knowledge is exactly the same: take his opinion of Baron Rothschild, he will say, "Yes, he keeps an account with us"; of Humphrey Brown, "Yes, we have that account, too." Just so with the class of minds which we are speaking of, and in greater matters. Very early in life they come to a certain and considerable acquaintance with the world; they learn very quickly all they can learn,

Digitized by Google

and naturally they never in any way learn any more. Mr. Pitt is in this country the type of the character. Mr. Alison, in a well-known passage,* makes it a matter of wonder that he was fit to be a Chancellor of the Exchequer at twenty-three, and it *is* a great wonder; but it is to be remembered that he was no more fit at forty-three. As somebody said, he did not grow, he was cast. Experience taught him nothing, and he did not believe that he had anything to learn. The habit of mind in smaller degrees is not very rare, and might be illustrated without end. Hazlitt tells a story of West, the painter, that is in point: when some one asked him if he had ever been to Greece, he answered, "No, I have read a descriptive catalogue of the principal objects in that country, and I believe I am as well conversant with them as if I had visited it."† No doubt he was just as well conversant, and so would be any *doctrinaire*.

But Shakespeare was not a man of this sort. If he walked down a street, he knew what was in that street. His mind did not form in early life a classified list of all the objects in the universe, and learn no more about the universe ever after. From a certain fine sensibility of nature, it is plain that he took a keen interest not only in the general and coarse outlines of objects, but in their minutest particulars and gentlest gradations. You may open Shakespeare and find the clearest proofs of this. Take the following:—

> "When last the young Orlando parted from you,
> He left a promise to return again
> Within an hour; and pacing through the forest,
> Chewing the food of sweet and bitter fancy,
> Lo, what befell! he threw his eye aside,
> And mark what object did present itself:—
> Under an oak, whose boughs were mossed with age
> And high top bald with dry antiquity,

* "History of Europe," Vol. ii., page 366.

† Roughly from "The Old Age of Artists," in the "Plain Speaker"; also note to "A Landscape of Nicolas Poussin," in the "Table Talk."

Digitized by Google

A wretched ragged man, o'ergrown with hair,
Lay sleeping on his back: about his neck
A green and gilded snake had wreathed itself,
Who with her head, nimble in threats, approached
The opening of his mouth; but suddenly,
Seeing Orlando, it unlinked itself,
And with indented glides did slip away
Into a bush: under which bush's shade
A lioness, with udders all drawn dry,
Lay couching, head on ground, with cat-like watch,
When that the sleeping man should stir; for 'tis
The royal disposition of that beast
To prey on nothing that doth seem as dead:
This seen," etc., etc. *

Or the more celebrated description of the hunt:—

"And when thou hast on foot the purblind hare,
Mark the poor wretch, to overshoot his troubles,
How he outruns the wind, and with what care
He cranks and crosses, with a thousand doubles:
The many musits through the which he goes
Are like a labyrinth to amaze his foes.

"Sometime he runs among a flock of sheep,
To make the cunning hounds mistake their smell,
And sometime where earth-delving conies keep,
To stop the loud pursuers in their yell;
And sometime sorteth with a herd of deer:
Danger deviseth shifts; wit waits on fear:

"For there his smell with others being mingled,
The hot scent-snuffing hounds are driven to doubt,
Ceasing their clamorous cry till they have singled,
With much ado, the cold fault cleanly out:
Then do they spend their mouths; Echo replies,
As if another chase were in the skies.

"By this, poor Wat, far off upon a hill,
Stands on his hinder legs with listening ear,
To hearken if his foes pursue him still;
Anon their loud alarums he doth hear;
And now his grief may be compared well
To one sore sick that hears the passing-bell.

* "As You Like it," iv. 3.

Digitized by Google

"Then shalt thou see the dew-bedabbled wretch
Turn and return, indenting with the way;
Each envious briar his weary legs doth scratch,
Each shadow makes him stop, each murmur stay:
For misery is trodden on by many,
And being low, never relieved by any." *

It is absurd, by the way, to say we know *nothing* about the man who wrote that: we know that he had been after a hare. It is idle to allege that mere imagination would tell him that a hare is apt to run among a flock of sheep, or that its so doing disconcerts the scent of hounds. But no single citation really represents the power of the argument: set descriptions may be manufactured to order, and it does not follow that even the most accurate or successful of them was really the result of a thorough and habitual knowledge of the object. A man who knows little of nature may write one excellent delineation, as a poor man may have one bright guinea; real opulence consists in having many. What truly indicates excellent knowledge is the habit of constant, sudden, and almost unconscious allusion, which implies familiarity, for it can arise from that alone; and this very species of incidental, casual, and perpetual reference to "the mighty world of eye and ear" † is the particular characteristic of Shakespeare.

In this respect Shakespeare had the advantage of one whom, in many points, he much resembled,—Sir Walter Scott. For a great poet, the organization of the latter was very blunt: he had no sense of smell, little sense of taste, almost no ear for music (he knew a few, perhaps three, Scotch tunes, which he avowed that he had learnt in sixty years, by hard labor and mental association), and not much turn for the minutiæ of nature in any way. The effect of this may be seen in some of the best descriptive passages of his poetry; and we will not deny that it does (although proceeding from a sensuous defect) in a certain degree add to their popularity. He deals

* "Venus and Adonis." † Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey."

Digitized by Google

with the main outlines and great points of nature, never attends to any others, and in this respect he suits the comprehension and knowledge of many who know only those essential and considerable outlines. Young people especially, who like big things, are taken with Scott, and bored by Wordsworth, who knew too much. And after all, the two poets are in proper harmony, each with his own scenery. Of all beautiful scenery the Scotch is the roughest and barest, as the English is the most complex and cultivated. What a difference is there between the minute and finished delicacy of Rydal Water and the rough simplicity of Loch Katrine! It is the beauty of civilization beside the beauty of barbarism. Scott has himself pointed out the effect of this on arts and artists: —

"Or see yon weather-beaten hind,
Whose sluggish herds before him wind,
Whose tattered plaid and rugged cheek
His Northern clime and kindred speak;
Through England's laughing meads he goes,
And England's wealth around him flows:
Ask if it would content him well
At ease in those gay plains to dwell,
Where hedgerows spread a verdant screen,
And spires and forests intervene,
And the neat cottage peeps between?
No! not for these would he exchange
His dark Lochaber's boundless range,
Not for fair Devon's meads forsake
Ben Nevis gray and Garry's lake.

"Thus while I ape the measure wild
Of tales that charmed me yet a child,
Rude though they be, still with the chime
Return the thoughts of early time;
And feelings roused in life's first day
Glow in the line and prompt the lay.
Then rise those crags, that mountain tower,
Which charmed my fancy's wakening hour.
Though no broad river swept along,
To claim perchance heroic song;

Digitized by Google

Though sighed no groves in summer gale,
To prompt of love a softer tale;
Though scarce a puny streamlet's speed
Claimed homage from a shepherd's reed,—
Yet was poetic impulse given
By the green hill and clear blue heaven.
It was a barren scene and wild,
Where naked cliffs were rudely piled,
But ever and anon between
Lay velvet tufts of loveliest green;
And well the lonely infant knew
Recesses where the wallflower grew,
And honeysuckle loved to crawl
Up the low crag and ruined wall.
. . . . .
"For me, thus nurtured, dost thou ask
The classic poet's well-conned task?
Nay, Erskine, nay,—on the wild hill
Let the wild heath-bell flourish still;
Cherish the tulip, prune the vine,
But freely let the woodbine twine,
And leave untrimmed the eglantine.
Nay, my friend, nay,—since oft thy praise
Hath given fresh vigor to my lays,
Since oft thy judgment could refine
My flattened thought or cumbrous line,
Still kind, as is thy wont, attend,
And in the minstrel spare the friend.
Though wild as cloud, as stream, as gale,
Flow forth, flow unrestrained, my tale!"*

And this is wise, for there is beauty in the North as well as in the South. Only it is to be remembered that the beauty of the Trosachs is the result of but a few elements,—say birch and brushwood, rough hills and narrow dells, much heather and many stones,—while the beauty of England is one thing in one district and one in another; is here the combination of one set of qualities, and there the harmony of opposite ones, and is everywhere made up of many details and delicate refinements, all which require an exquisite

*"Marmion," Introduction to Canto iii.

Digitized by Google

delicacy of perceptive organization, a seeing eye, a minutely hearing ear. Scott's is the strong admiration of a rough mind; Shakespeare's, the nice minuteness of a susceptible one.

A perfectly poetic appreciation of nature contains two elements,—a knowledge of facts and a sensibility to charms. Everybody who may have to speak to some naturalists will be well aware how widely the two may be separated. He will have seen that a man may study butterflies and forget that they are beautiful, or be perfect in the "lunar theory" without knowing what most people mean by the moon. Generally such people prefer the stupid parts of nature,—worms and Cochin-China fowls. But Shakespeare was not obtuse. The lines—

> "Daffodils,
> That come before the swallow dares, and take
> The winds of March with beauty; violets dim,
> But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes
> Or Cytherea's breath,"*

seem to show that he knew those feelings of youth to which beauty is more than a religion.

In his mode of delineating natural objects, Shakespeare is curiously opposed to Milton. The latter, who was still by temperament and a schoolmaster by trade, selects a beautiful object, puts it straight out before him and his readers, and accumulates upon it all the learned imagery of a thousand years; Shakespeare glances at it and says something of his own. It is not our intention to say that as a describer of the external world, Milton is inferior: in *set* description we rather think that he is the better. We only wish to contrast the mode in which the delineation is effected. The one is like an artist who dashes off any number of picturesque sketches at any moment; the other like a man who has lived at Rome, has undergone a thorough training, and by deliberate and

* "Winter's Tale," iv. 3.

Digitized by Google

conscious effort, after a long study of the best masters, can produce a few great pictures. Milton, accordingly, as has been often remarked, is careful in the choice of his subjects,—he knows too well the value of his labor to be very ready to squander it; Shakespeare, on the contrary, describes anything that comes to hand, for he is prepared for it whatever it may be, and what he paints he paints without effort. Compare any passage from Shakespeare—for example, those quoted before—and the following passage from Milton:—

"Southward through Eden went a river large,
Nor changed its course, but through the shaggy hill
Passed underneath ingulfed,—for God had thrown
That mountain as his garden mold, high raised
Upon the rapid current, which, through veins
Of porous earth with kindly thirst updrawn,
Rose a fresh fountain, and with many a rill
Watered the garden; thence united fell
Down the steep glade, and met the nether flood,
Which from its darksome passage now appears;
And now divided into four main streams
Runs diverse, wandering many a famous realm
And country, whereof here needs no account:
But rather to tell how,—if art could tell,—
How from that sapphire fount the crispèd brooks,
Rolling on orient pearl and sands of gold,
With mazy error under pendant shades
Ran nectar, visiting each plant; and fed
Flowers worthy of Paradise, which not nice art
In beds and curious knots, but nature boon
Poured forth profuse on hill and dale and plain,
Both where the morning sun first warmly smote
The open field, and where the unpierced shade
Imbrowned the noontide bowers. Thus was this place
A happy rural seat of various view:
Groves whose rich trees wept odorous gums and balm;
Others whose fruit, burnished with golden rind,
Hung amiable (Hesperian fables true,
If true, here only), and of delicious taste;
Betwixt them lawns or level downs, and flocks
Grazing the tender herb, were interposed,
Or palmy hillock, or the flowery lap

Digitized by Google

> Of some irriguous valley spread her store;
> Flowers of all hue, and without thorn the rose." *

Why, you could draw a map of it. It is *not* "nature boon," but "nice art in beds and curious knots;" it is exactly the old (and excellent) style of artificial gardening, by which any place can be turned into trim hedge-rows, and stiff borders, and comfortable shades: but there are no straight lines in nature or Shakespeare. Perhaps the contrast may be accounted for by the way in which the two poets acquired their knowledge of scenes and scenery. We think we demonstrated before that Shakespeare was a sportsman; but if there be still a skeptic or a dissentient, let him read the following remarks on dogs:—

> "My hounds are bred out of the Spartan kind,
> So flewed, so sanded; and their heads are hung
> With ears that sweep away the morning dew;
> Crook-kneed, and dewlapped like Thessalian bulls;
> Slow in pursuit, but matched in mouth like bells,
> Each under each. A cry more tunable
> Was never holla'd to nor cheered with horn
> In Crete, in Sparta, nor in Thessaly." †

"Judge when you hear." ‡ It is evident that the man who wrote this was a judge of dogs, was an out-of-door sporting man, full of natural sensibility, not defective in "daintiness of ear," and above all things apt to cast on nature random, sportive, half-boyish glances, which reveal so much and bequeath such abiding knowledge. Milton, on the contrary, went out to see nature. He left a narrow cell, and the intense study which was his "portion in this life," to take a slow, careful, and reflective walk. In his treatise on Education he has given us his notion of the way in which young people should be familiarized with natural objects. "But," he remarks, "to return to our own institute: besides these constant exercises

* "Paradise Lost," Book iv. † "Midsummer Night's Dream," iv. 1.
‡ Line immediately following verse above.

Digitized by Google

at home, there is another opportunity of gaining experience to be won from pleasure itself abroad. In those vernal seasons of the year when the air is calm and pleasant, it were an injury and sullenness against nature not to go out and see her riches, and partake in her rejoicing with heaven and earth. I should not therefore be a persuader to them of studying much then, after two or three years that they have well laid their grounds, but to ride out in companies with prudent and staid guides, to all the quarters of the land: learning and observing all places of strength, all commodities of building and of soil, for towns and tillage, harbors and ports for trade; sometimes taking sea as far as to our navy, to learn there also what they can in the practical knowledge of sailing and of sea-fight." Fancy the "prudent and staid guides." What a machinery for making pedants! Perhaps Shakespeare would have known that the conversation would be in this sort:—"I say, Shallow, that mare is going in the knees. She has never been the same since you larked her over the fivebar, while Moleyes was talking clay and agriculture. I do not hate Latin so much, but I hate 'argillaceous earth'; and what use is *that* to a fellow in the Guards, *I* should like to know?" Shakespeare had himself this sort of boyish buoyancy; he was not one of the "staid guides." We might further illustrate it, yet this would be tedious enough; and we prefer to go on and show what we mean by an experiencing nature in relation to men and women, just as we have striven to indicate what it is in relation to horses and hares.

The reason why so few good books are written is, that so few people that can write know anything. In general an author has always lived in a room, has read books, has cultivated science, is acquainted with the style and sentiments of the best authors, but he is out of the way of employing his own eyes and ears. He has nothing to hear and nothing to see.

Digitized by Google

His life is a vacuum. The mental habits of Robert Southey, which about a year ago were so extensively praised in the public journals, are the type of literary existence, just as the praise bestowed on them shows the admiration excited by them among literary people. He wrote poetry (as if anybody could) before breakfast; he read during breakfast. He wrote history until dinner; he corrected proof sheets between dinner and tea; he wrote an essay for the *Quarterly* afterwards; and after supper, by way of relaxation, composed "The Doctor"—a lengthy and elaborate jest. Now, what can any one think of such a life?—except how clearly it shows that the habits best fitted for communicating information, formed with the best care, and daily regulated by the best motives, are exactly the habits which are likely to afford a man the least information to communicate. Southey had no events, no experiences. His wife kept house and allowed him pocket-money, just as if he had been a German professor devoted to accents, tobacco, and the dates of Horace's amours. And it is pitiable to think that so meritorious a life was only made endurable by a painful delusion. He thought that day by day, and hour by hour, he was accumulating stores for the instruction and entertainment of a long posterity. His epics were to be in the hands of all men, and his history of Brazil the "Herodotus of the South American Republics"; as if his epics were not already dead, and as if the people who now cheat at Valparaiso care a *real* who it was that cheated those before them. Yet it was only by a conviction like this that an industrious and caligraphic man (for such was Robert Southey), who might have earned money as a clerk, worked all his days for half a clerk's wages, at occupation much duller and more laborious. The critic in the "Vicar of Wakefield" lays down that you should *always* say that the picture would have been better if the painter had taken more pains; but in the case of the

Digitized by Google

practiced literary man, you should often enough say that the writings would have been much better if the writer had taken less pains. He says he has devoted his life to the subject; the reply is, "Then you have taken the best way to prevent your making anything of it. Instead of reading studiously what Burgersdicius and Ænesidemus said men were, you should have gone out yourself and seen (if you can see) what they are."

After all, the original way of writing books may turn out to be the best. The first author, it is plain, could not have taken anything from books, since there were no books for him to copy from; he looked at things for himself. Anyhow the modern system fails, for where are the amusing books from voracious students and habitual writers? Not that we mean exactly to say that an author's hard reading is the cause of his writing that which is hard to read. This would be near the truth, but not quite the truth. The two are concomitant effects of a certain defective nature. Slow men read well, but write ill. The abstracted habit, the want of keen exterior interests, the aloofness of mind from what is next it, all tend to make a man feel an exciting curiosity and interest about remote literary events, the toils of scholastic logicians, and the petty feuds of Argos and Lacedæmon; but they also tend to make a man very unable to explain and elucidate those exploits for the benefit of his fellows. What separates the author from his readers will make it proportionably difficult for him to explain himself to them. Secluded habits do not tend to eloquence; and the indifferent apathy which is so common in studious persons is exceedingly unfavorable to the liveliness of narration and illustration which is needed for excellence in even the simpler sorts of writing. Moreover, in general, it will perhaps be found that persons devoted to mere literature commonly become devoted to mere idleness. They wish to produce a

Digitized by Google

great work, but they find they cannot. Having relinquished everything to devote themselves to this, they conclude on trial that this is impossible; they wish to write, but nothing occurs to them: therefore they write nothing, and they do nothing. As has been said, they have nothing to do; their life has no events, unless they are very poor; with any decent means of subsistence, they have nothing to rouse them from an indolent and musing dream. A merchant must meet his bills, or he is civilly dead and uncivilly remembered; but a student may know nothing of time and be too lazy to wind up his watch. In the retired citizen's journal in Addison's *Spectator* we have the type of this way of spending the time: "Mem. — Morning 8 to 9, went into the parlor and tied on my shoe-buckles." * This is the sort of life for which studious men commonly relinquish the pursuits of business and the society of their fellows.

Yet all literary men are not tedious, neither are they all slow. One great example even these most tedious times have luckily given us, to show us what may be done by a really great man even now; the same who before served as an illustration, — Sir Walter Scott. In his lifetime people denied he was a poet, but nobody said that he was not "the best fellow" † in Scotland, — perhaps that was not much, — or that he had not more wise joviality, more living talk, more graphic humor, than any man in Great Britain. "Wherever we named him," said Mr. Wordsworth, "we found the word acted as an *open sesamum;* and I believe that in the character of the *sheriff's* friends, we might have counted on a hearty welcome under any roof in the border country." ‡ Never neglect to talk to people with whom you are casually thrown, was his precept; and he exemplified the maxim himself: —

* No. 317. A very "wild" quotation. — Ed.

† "He was a *thorough good fellow.*" — Moore; Lockhart, Vol. v., Chap. iii.

‡ Lockhart, Vol. ii., Chap. i.

Digitized by Google

"I believe," observes his biographer, "Scott has somewhere expressed in print his satisfaction that among all the changes of our manners, the ancient freedom of personal intercourse may still be indulged between a master and an *out-of-doors* servant; but in truth he kept by the old fashion, even with domestic servants, to an extent which I have hardly seen practiced by any other gentleman. He conversed with his coachman if he sat by him, as he often did, on the box; with his footman, if he chanced to be in the rumble. . . . Indeed, he did not confine this humanity to his own people; any steady servant of a friend of his was soon considered as a sort of friend too, and was sure to have a kind little colloquy to himself at coming and going."*

"Sir Walter speaks to every man as if they were blood relations," † was the expressive comment of one of these dependents. It was in this way that he acquired the great knowledge of various kinds of men which is so clear and conspicuous in his writings; nor could that knowledge have been acquired on easier terms, or in any other way. No man could describe the character of Dandie Dinmont ‡ without having been in Liddesdale. Whatever has been once in a book may be put into a book again; but an original character, taken at first hand from the sheep-walks and from nature, must be seen in order to be known. A man, to be able to describe — indeed, to be able to know — various people in life, must be able at sight to comprehend their essential features, to know how they shade one into another, to see how they diversify the common uniformity of civilized life. Nor does this involve simply intellectual or even imaginative prerequisites; still less will it be facilitated by exquisite senses or subtle fancy. What is wanted is, to be able to appreciate mere clay, — which mere mind never will. If you will describe the people, — nay, if you will write for the people, — you must be one of the people; you must have led their life, and must wish to lead their life. However strong in any poet may be the higher qualities of

* Lockhart, Vol. iv., Chap. xi. † Ibid., Vol. v., Chap. xii.
‡ In "Guy Mannering."

Digitized by Google

abstract thought or conceiving fancy, unless he can actually sympathize with those around him he can never describe those around him. Any attempt to produce a likeness of what is not really *liked* by the person who is describing it will end in the creation of what may be correct, but is not living; of what may be artistic, but is likewise artificial.

Perhaps this is the defect of the works of the greatest dramatic genius of recent times, — Goethe. His works are too much in the nature of literary studies; the mind is often deeply impressed by them, but one doubts if the author was. He saw them as he saw the houses of Weimar and the plants in the act of metamorphosis: he had a clear perception of their fixed condition and their successive transitions, but he did not really (if we may so speak) comprehend their motive power; so to say, he appreciated their life, but not their liveliness. Niebuhr, as is well known, compared the most elaborate of Goethe's works, the novel of "Wilhelm Meister," to a menagerie of tame animals; meaning thereby, as we believe, to express much the same distinction, — he felt that there was a deficiency in mere vigor and rude energy. We have a long train and no engine; a great accumulation of excellent matter, arranged and ordered with masterly skill, but not animated with over-buoyant and unbounded play. And we trace this not to a defect in imaginative power, — a defect which it would be a simple absurdity to impute to Goethe, — but to the tone of his character and the habits of his mind. He moved hither and thither through life, but he was always a man apart. He mixed with unnumbered kinds of men, with courts and academies, students and women, camps and artists; but everywhere he was with them yet not of them. In every scene he was there; and he made it clear that he was there with a reserve and as a stranger, — he went there *to experience*. As a man of universal culture, and well skilled in the order and classification of

Digitized by Google

human life, the fact of any one class or order being beyond his reach or comprehension seemed an absurdity, and it was an absurdity; he thought he was equal to moving in any description of society, and he was equal to it: but then, on that exact account he was absorbed in none; there were none of surpassing and immeasurably preponderating captivation. No scene and no subject were to him what Scotland and Scotch nature were to Sir Walter Scott. "If I did not see the heather at least once a year, I think I should die," said the latter;* but Goethe would have lived without it, and it would not have cost him much trouble. In every one of Scott's novels there is always the spirit of the old moss-trooper, the flavor of the ancient Border; there is the intense sympathy which enters into the most living moments of the most living characters, — the lively energy which *becomes* the energy of the most vigorous persons delineated. "Marmion" was "written" while he was galloping on horseback: it reads as if it were so.

Now, it appears that Shakespeare not only had that various commerce with and experience of men which was common both to Goethe and to Scott, but also that he agrees with the latter rather than with the former in the kind and species of that experience. He was not merely with men, but of men; he was not a "thing apart,"† with a clear intuition of what was in those around him,—he had in his own nature the germs and tendencies of the very elements that he described. He knew what was in man, for he felt it in himself. Throughout all his writings you see an amazing sympathy with common people; rather an excessive tendency to dwell on the common features of ordinary lives. You feel that common people could have been cut out of him, but not without his feeling it; for it would have deprived him of a very favorite subject, — of a portion of his ideas to which he habitually recurred.

* To Washington Irving; see Lockhart, Vol. iv., Chap. iii.

† "Man's love is of man's life a thing apart." — "Don Juan," i., cxciv.

Digitized by Google

"*Leonato.* What would you with me, honest neighbor?

Dogberry. Marry, sir, I would have some confidence with you, that decerns you nearly.

Leon. Brief, I pray you; for you see 'tis a busy time with me.

Dog. Marry, this it is, sir—

Verges. Yes, in truth it is, sir.

Leon. What is it, my good friends?

Dog. Goodman Verges, sir, speaks a little off the matter: an old man, sir, and his wits are not so blunt as, God help, I would desire they were; but in faith, honest as the skin between his brows.

Verg. Yes, I thank God, I am as honest as any man living, that is an old man, and no honester than I.

Dog. Comparisons are odorous;—*palabras*, neighbor Verges.

Leon. Neighbors, you are tedious.

Dog. It pleases your worship to say so, but we are the poor duke's officers; but truly, for my own part, if I were as tedious as a king, I could find in my heart to bestow it all of your worship.

. . . . . .

Leon. I would fain know what you have to say.

Verg. Marry, sir, our watch to-night, excepting your worship's presence, have ta'en a couple of as arrant knaves as any in Messina.

Dog. A good old man, sir; he will be talking: as they say, When the age is in, the wit is out. God help us! it is a world to see!—Well said, i'faith, neighbor Verges;—well, God's a good man; an two men ride of a horse, one must ride behind.—An honest soul, i'faith, sir, by my troth he is, as ever broke bread; but God is to be worshiped: all men are not alike,—alas, good neighbor!

Leon. Indeed, neighbor, he comes too short of you.

Dog. 'Gifts that God gives—'" Etc., etc.*

"*Stafford.* Ay, sir.

Cade. By her he had two children at one birth.

Staff. That's false.

Cade. Ay, there's the question; but I say 'tis true:
The elder of them being put to nurse,
Was by a beggar-woman stolen away;
And, ignorant of his birth and parentage,
Became a bricklayer when he came to age;
His son am I: deny it if you can.

Dick. Nay, 'tis too true; therefore he shall be king.

Smith. Sir, he made a chimney in my father's house, and the bricks are alive at this day to testify it; therefore, deny it not."†

*"Much Ado about Nothing," iii. 5. †"2 King Henry VI.," iv. 2.

Digitized by Google

Shakespeare was too wise not to know that for most of the purposes of human life, stupidity is a most valuable element. He had nothing of the impatience which sharp logical narrow minds habitually feel when they come across those who do not apprehend their quick and precise deductions. No doubt he talked to the stupid players; to the stupid doorkeeper; to the property man, who considers paste jewels "very preferable, besides the expense"; talked with the stupid apprentices of stupid Fleet Street, and had much pleasure in ascertaining what was their notion of "King Lear." In his comprehensive mind it was enough if every man hitched well into his own place in human life. If every one were logical and literary, how would there be scavengers or watchmen or calkers or coopers? Narrow minds will be "subdued to what they work in." The "dyer's hand" will not more clearly carry off its tint, nor will what is molded more precisely indicate the confines of the mold. A patient sympathy, a kindly fellow-feeling, for the narrow intelligence necessarily induced by narrow circumstances, — a narrowness which in some degrees seems to be inevitable, and is perhaps more serviceable than most things to the wise conduct of life, — this, though quick and half-bred minds may despise it, seems to be a necessary constituent in the composition of manifold genius. "How shall the world be served?" asks the host in Chaucer. We must have cart-horses as well as race-horses, draymen as well as poets. It is no bad thing, after all, to be a slow man and to have one idea a year. You don't make a figure, perhaps, in argumentative society, which requires a quicker species of thought; but is that the worse?

"*Holofernes.* *Via*, Goodman Dull! thou hast spoken no word all this while.

Dull. Nor understood none neither, sir.

Hol. *Allons!* we will employ thee.

*Shakespeare, Sonnet cxi. † Ibid.

Digitized by Google

Dull. I'll make one in a dance or so; or I will play
On the tabor to the worthies, and let them dance the hay.
Hol. Most dull, honest Dull! to our sport away!"*

And such, we believe, was the notion of Shakespeare.

S. T. Coleridge has a nice criticism which bears on this point. He observes that in the narrations of uneducated people in Shakespeare, just as in real life, there is a want of prospectiveness and a superfluous amount of regressiveness. People of this sort are unable to look a long way in front of them, and they wander from the right path. They get on too fast with one half, and then the other hopelessly lags. They can tell a story exactly as it is told to them (as an animal can go step by step where it has been before); but they can't calculate its bearings beforehand or see how it is to be adapted to those to whom they are speaking, nor do they know how much they have thoroughly told and how much they have not. "I went up the street, then I went down the street; no, first went down and then — but you do not follow me: I go before you, sir." Thence arises the complex style usually adopted by persons not used to narration. They tumble into a story and get on as they can. This is scarcely the sort of thing which a man could foresee. Of course a metaphysician can account for it, and like Coleridge, assure you that if he had not observed it, he could have predicted it in a moment; but nevertheless, it is too refined a conclusion to be made out from known premises by common reasoning. Doubtless there is some reason why negroes have woolly hair (and if you look into a philosophical treatise, you will find that the author could have made out that it would be so, if he had not, by a mysterious misfortune, known from infancy that it was the fact); still, one could never have supposed it one's self. And in the same manner, though the profounder critics

* "Love's Labor's Lost," v. 1.

Digitized by Google

may explain in a satisfactory and refined manner how the confused and undulating style of narration is peculiarly incident to the mere multitude, yet it is most likely that Shakespeare derived his acquaintance with it from the fact, from actual hearing, and not from what may be the surer but is the slower process of metaphysical deduction. The best passage to illustrate this is that in which the nurse gives a statement of Juliet's age; but it will not exactly suit our pages. The following of Mrs. Quickly will suffice:

"Tilly-fally, Sir John, ne'er tell me; your ancient swaggerer comes not in my doors. I was before Master Tisick, the deputy, 'tother day; and as he said to me,—'twas no longer ago than Wednesday last: 'Neighbor Quickly,' says he,—Master Dumb, our minister, was by then,—'Neighbor Quickly,' says he, 'receive those that are civil; for,' saith he, 'you are in an ill name:'—now, 'a said so, I can tell whereupon: 'for,' says he, 'you are an honest woman, and well thought on; therefore take heed what guests you receive. Receive,' says he, 'no swaggering companions.'—There comes none here.—You would bless you to hear what he said:—no, I'll no swaggerers."*

Now, it is quite impossible that this, any more than the political reasoning on the parentage of Cade, which was cited before, should have been written by one not habitually and sympathizingly conversant with the talk of the illogical classes. Shakespeare felt, if we may say so, the force of the bad reasoning. He did not, like a sharp logician, angrily detect a flaw, and set it down as a fallacy of reference or a fallacy of amphibology. This is not the English way, though Dr. Whately's logic has been published so long (and, as he says himself, must now be deemed to be irrefutable, since no one has ever offered any refutation of it). Yet still, people in this country do not like to be committed to distinct premises. They like a Chancellor of the Exchequer to say, "It has during very many years been maintained by the honorable member for

*"2 King Henry IV.," ii. 4.

Digitized by Google

Montrose that two and two make four, and I am free to say that I think there is a great deal to be said in favor of that opinion; but without committing Her Majesty's Government to that proposition as an abstract sentiment, I will go so far as to assume two and two are not sufficient to make five, which, with the permission of the House, will be a sufficient basis for all the operations which I propose to enter upon during the present year." We have no doubt Shakespeare reasoned in that way himself. Like any other Englishman, when he had a clear course before him, he rather liked to shuffle over little hitches in the argument, and on that account he had a great sympathy with those who did so too. He would never have interrupted Mrs. Quickly: he saw that her mind was going to and fro over the subject; he saw that it was coming right, and this was enough for him,— and will be also enough of this topic for our readers.

We think we have proved that Shakespeare had an enormous specific acquaintance with the common people; that this can only be obtained by sympathy. It likewise has a further condition.

In spiritedness, the style of Shakespeare is very like to that of Scott. The description of a charge of cavalry in Scott reads, as was said before, as if it was written on horseback. A play by Shakespeare reads as if it were written in a play-house. The great critics assure you that a theatrical audience must be kept awake; but Shakespeare knew this of his own knowledge. When you read him, you feel a sensation of motion; a conviction that there is something "up"; a notion that not only is something being talked about, but also that something is being done. We do not imagine that Shakespeare owed this quality to his being a player, but rather that he became a player because he possessed this quality of mind. For after and notwithstanding everything which has [been] or may be said against the theatrical profession, it certainly does require from

Digitized by Google

those who pursue it a certain quickness and liveliness of mind. Mimics are commonly an elastic sort of persons, and it takes a little levity of disposition to enact even the "heavy fathers." If a boy joins a company of strolling players, you may be sure that he is not a "good boy": he may be a trifle foolish, or a thought romantic, but certainly he is not slow. And this was in truth the case with Shakespeare. They say, too, that in the beginning he was a first-rate link-boy; and the tradition is affecting, though we fear it is not quite certain. Anyhow, you feel about Shakespeare that he could have been a link-boy. In the same way you feel he may have been a player. You are sure at once that he could not have followed any sedentary kind of life. But wheresoever there was anything *acted*, in earnest or in jest, by way of mock representation or by way of serious reality, there he found matter for his mind.

If anybody could have any doubt about the liveliness of Shakespeare, let them consider the character of Falstaff. When a man has created *that* without a capacity for laughter, then a blind man may succeed in describing colors. Intense animal spirits are the single sentiment (if they be a sentiment) of the entire character. If most men were to save up all the gayety of their whole lives, it would come about to the gayety of one speech in Falstaff. A morose man might have amassed many jokes; might have observed many details of jovial society; might have conceived a Sir John marked by rotundity of body,—but could hardly have imagined what we call his rotundity of mind. We mean that the animal spirits of Falstaff give him an easy, vague, diffusive sagacity which is peculiar to him. A morose man—Iago, for example—may know anything, and is apt to know a good deal; but what he knows is generally all in corners. He knows No. 1, No. 2, No. 3, and so on; but there is not anything continuous or smooth or fluent in his knowledge. Persons conversant with

Digitized by Google

the works of Hazlitt will know in a minute what we mean. Everything which he observed he seemed to observe from a certain soreness of mind: he looked at people because they offended him; he had the same vivid notion of them that a man has of objects which grate on a wound in his body. But there is nothing at all of this in Falstaff; on the contrary, everything pleases him, and everything is food for a joke. Cheerfulness and prosperity give an easy abounding sagacity of mind which nothing else does give. Prosperous people bound easily over all the surface of things which their lives present to them. Very likely they keep to the surface; there are things beneath or above to which they may not penetrate or attain: but what is on any part of the surface, that they know well. "Lift not the painted veil which those who live call life," * and they do not lift it. What is sublime or awful above, what is "sightless and drear" † beneath, — these they may not dream of. Nor is any one piece or corner of life so well impressed on them as on minds less happily constituted. It is only people who have had a tooth out that really know the dentist's waiting-room. Yet such people, for the time at least, know nothing but that and their tooth. The easy and sympathizing friend who accompanies them knows everything; hints gently at the contents of the *Times*, and would cheer you with Lord Palmerston's replies. So, on a greater scale, the man of painful experience knows but too well what has hurt him, and where and why; but the happy have a vague and rounded view of the round world, and such was the knowledge of Falstaff.

It is to be observed that these high spirits are not a mere excrescence or superficial point in an experiencing nature; on the contrary, they seem to be essential, if not to its idea or existence, at least to its exercise and employment. How are you to know people without talking to them? but how are you to talk to them without tiring yourself? A common

* Shelley, Sonnet (1818). † Ibid.

Digitized by Google

man is exhausted in half an hour; Scott or Shakespeare could have gone on for a whole day. This is perhaps peculiarly necessary for a painter of English life. The basis of our national character seems to be a certain energetic humor, which may be found in full vigor in old Chaucer's time, and in great perfection in at least one of the popular writers of this age, and which is perhaps most easily described by the name of our greatest painter,—Hogarth. It is amusing to see how entirely the efforts of critics and artists fail to naturalize in England any other sort of painting. Their efforts are fruitless, for the people painted are not English people: they may be Italians or Greeks or Jews, but it is quite certain that they are foreigners. We should not fancy that modern art ought to resemble the mediæval. So long as artists attempt the same class of paintings as Raphael, they will not only be inferior to Raphael, but they will never please, as they might please, the English people. What we want is what Hogarth gave us,—a representation of ourselves. It may be that we are wrong; that we ought to prefer something of the old world, some scene in Rome or Athens, some tale from Carmel or Jerusalem: but after all, we do not. These places are, we think, abroad, and had their greatness in former times: we wish a copy of what now exists, and of what we have seen. London we know, and Manchester we know; but where are all these? It is the same with literature,—Milton excepted, and even Milton can hardly be called a popular writer: all great English writers describe English people, and in describing them they give, as they must give, a large comic element; and speaking generally, this is scarcely possible, except in the case of cheerful and easy-living men. There is, no doubt, a biting satire, like that of Swift, which has for its essence misanthropy; there is the mockery of Voltaire, which is based on intellectual contempt: but this is not our English humor,—it is not that of Shakespeare and Falstaff; ours is

Digitized by Google

the humor of a man who laughs when he speaks, of flowing enjoyment, of an experiencing nature.

Yet it would be a great error if we gave anything like an exclusive prominence to this aspect of Shakespeare. Thus he appeared to those around him,—in some degree they knew that he was a cheerful and humorous and happy man; but of his higher gift they knew less than we. A great painter of men must (as has been said) have a faculty of conversing, but he must also have a capacity for solitude. There is much of mankind that a man can only learn from himself. Behind every man's external life, which he leads in company, there is another which he leads alone, and which he carries with him apart. We see but one aspect of our neighbor, as we see but one side of the moon; in either case there is also a dark half, which is unknown to us. We all come down to dinner, but each has a room to himself. And if we would study the internal lives of others, it seems essential that we should begin with our own. If we study this our *datum*, if we attain to see and feel how this influences and evolves itself in our social and (so to say) public life, then it is possible that we may find in the lives of others the same or analogous features; and if we do not, then at least we may suspect that those who want them are deficient likewise in the secret agencies which we feel produce them in ourselves. The metaphysicians assert that people originally picked up the idea of the existence of other people in this way. It is orthodox doctrine that a baby says, "I have a mouth, mamma has a mouth; therefore I'm the same species as mamma. I have a nose, papa has a nose; therefore papa is the same genus as me." But whether or not this ingenious idea really does or does not represent the actual process by which we originally obtain an acquaintance with the existence of minds analogous to our own, it gives unquestionably the process by which we obtain our notion of that part of those minds which they

Digitized by Google

never exhibit consciously to others, and which only becomes predominant in secrecy and solitude and to themselves. Now, that Shakespeare has this insight into the musing life of man, as well as into his social life, is easy to prove; take, for instance, the following passages: —

"This battle fares like to the morning's war,
When dying clouds contend with growing light;
What time the shepherd, blowing of his nails,
Can neither call it perfect day nor night.
Now sways it this way, like a mighty sea
Forced by the tide to combat with the wind;
Now sways it that way, like the selfsame sea
Forced to retire by fury of the wind:
Sometime the flood prevails, and then the wind;
Now one the better, then another best;
Both tugging to be victors, breast to breast,
Yet neither conqueror nor conquered:
So is the equal poise of this fell war.
Here on this molehill will I sit me down.
To whom God will, there be the victory!
For Margaret my queen, and Clifford too,
Have chid me from the battle; swearing both
They prosper best of all when I am thence.
Would I were dead! if God's good will were so;
For what is in this world but grief and woe?
O God! methinks it were a happy life,
To be no better than a homely swain:
To sit upon a hill, as I do now,
To carve out dials quaintly, point by point,
Thereby to see the minutes how they run, —
How many make the hour full complete;
How many hours bring about the day;
How many days will finish up the year;
How many years a mortal man may live.
When this is known, then to divide the times, —
So many hours must I tend my flock;
So many hours must I take my rest;
So many hours must I contemplate;
So many hours must I sport myself;
So many days my ewes have been with young;
So many weeks ere the poor fools will yean;

Digitized by Google

So many years ere I shall shear the fleece:
So minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years,
Passed over to the end they were created,
Would bring white hairs unto a quiet grave.
Ah, what a life were this! how sweet! how lovely!
Gives not the hawthorn bush a sweeter shade
To shepherds, looking on their silly sheep,
Than doth a rich embroidered canopy
To kings that fear their subjects' treachery?
Oh, yes, it doth; a thousandfold it doth.
And to conclude,—the shepherd's homely curds,
His cold thin drink out of his leather bottle,
His wonted sleep under a fresh tree's shade,
All which secure and sweetly he enjoys,
Is far beyond a prince's delicates,
His viands sparkling in a golden cup,
His body couchèd in a curious bed,
When care, mistrust, and treason wait on him."*

"A fool, a fool!—I met a fool i' the forest,
A motley fool;—a miserable world!—
As I do live by food, I met a fool;
Who laid him down and basked him in the sun,
And railed on lady Fortune in good terms,
In good set terms,—and yet a motley fool.
'Good-morrow, fool,' quoth I; 'No, sir,' quoth he,
'Call me not fool, till Heaven hath sent me fortune:'
And then he drew a dial from his poke,
And looking on it with lack-luster eye,
Says, very wisely, 'It is ten o'clock;
Thus may we see,' quoth he, 'how the world wags:
'Tis but an hour ago since it was nine;
And after one hour more 'twill be eleven;
And so, from hour to hour, we ripe and ripe,
And then, from hour to hour, we rot and rot,—
And thereby hangs a tale.' When I did hear
The motley fool thus moral on the time,
My lungs began to crow like chanticleer,
That fools should be so deep-contemplative;
And I did laugh, sans intermission,
An hour by his dial."†

* "3 King Henry VI.," ii. 5.
† "As You Like It," ii. 7.

Digitized by Google

No slight versatility of mind and pliancy of fancy could pass at will from scenes such as these to the ward of Eastcheap and the society which heard the chimes at midnight. One of the reasons of the rarity of great imaginative works is, that in very few cases is this capacity for musing solitude combined with that of observing mankind. A certain constitutional though latent melancholy is essential to such a nature. This is the exceptional characteristic in Shakespeare. All through his works you feel you are reading the popular author, the successful man; but through them all there is a certain tinge of musing sadness pervading, and as it were softening, their gayety. Not a trace can be found of "eating cares" or narrow and mind-contracting toil; but everywhere there is, in addition to shrewd sagacity and buoyant wisdom, a refining element of chastening sensibility, which prevents sagacity from being rough and shrewdness from becoming cold. He had an eye for either sort of life:—

> "Why, let the strucken deer go weep,
> The hart ungallèd play;
> For some must watch, while some must sleep:
> So runs the world away."*

In another point also, Shakespeare as he was must be carefully contrasted with the estimate that would be formed of him from such delineations as that of Falstaff, and that was doubtless frequently made by casual though only by casual frequenters of "The Mermaid." It has been said that the mind of Shakespeare contained within it the mind of Scott; it remains to be observed that it contained also the mind of Keats. For, beside the delineation of human life, and beside also the delineation of nature, there remains also for the poet a third subject,—the delineation of *fancies*. Of course these, be they what they may, are like to and were originally borrowed either from man or

* "Hamlet," iii. 2.

Digitized by Google

from nature,—from one or from both together. We know but two things in the simple way of direct experience, and whatever else we know must be in some mode or manner compacted out of them. Yet "books are a substantial world, both pure and good," and so are fancies too. In all countries men have devised to themselves a whole series of half-divine creations,—mythologies Greek and Roman, fairies, angels; beings who may be, for aught we know, but with whom in the mean time we can attain to no conversation. The most known of these mythologies are the Greek and—what is, we suppose, the second epoch of the Gothic—the fairies; and it so happens that Shakespeare has dealt with them both, and in a remarkable manner. We are not, indeed, of those critics who profess simple and unqualified admiration for the poem of "Venus and Adonis." It seems intrinsically, as we know it from external testimony to have been, a juvenile production, written when Shakespeare's nature might be well expected to be crude and unripened. Power is shown, and power of a remarkable kind; but it is not displayed in a manner that will please or does please the mass of men. In spite of the name of its author, the poem has never been popular; and surely this is sufficient. Nevertheless, it is remarkable as a literary exercise, and as a treatment of a singular though unpleasant subject. The fanciful class of poems differ from others in being laid, so far as their scene goes, in a perfectly unseen world. The type of such productions is Keats's "Endymion." We mean that it is the type, not as giving the abstract perfection of this sort of art, but because it shows and embodies both its excellences and defects in a very marked and prominent manner. In that poem there are no passions and no actions, there is no art and no life; but there is beauty, and that is meant to be enough, and to a reader of one-and-twenty it is enough and more. What are exploits or speeches, what is Cæsar or Coriolanus, what is a

Digitized by Google

tragedy like "Lear," or a real view of human life in any kind whatever, to people who do not know and do not care what human life is? In early youth it is perhaps not true that the passions, taken generally, are particularly violent, or that the imagination is in any remarkable degree powerful; but it is certain that the fancy (which, though it be in the last resort but a weak stroke of that same faculty which when it strikes hard we call imagination, may yet for this purpose be looked on as distinct) is particularly wakeful, and that the gentler species of passions are more absurd than they are afterwards. And the literature of this period of human life runs naturally away from the real world; away from the less ideal portion of it,—from stocks and stones, and aunts and uncles,—and rests on mere half-embodied sentiments, which in the hands of great poets assume a kind of semi-personality, and are, to the distinction between things and persons, "as moonlight unto sunlight, and as water unto wine."* The "Sonnets" of Shakespeare belong exactly to the same school of poetry. They are not the sort of verses to take any particular hold upon the mind permanently and forever, but at a certain period they take too much. For a young man to read in the spring of the year, among green fields and in gentle air, they are the ideal. As first-of-April poetry they are perfect.

The "Midsummer Night's Dream" is of another order. If the question were to be decided by "Venus and Adonis," in spite of the unmeasured panegyrics of many writers, we should be obliged in equity to hold that as a poet of mere fancy, Shakespeare was much inferior to the late Mr. Keats, and even to meaner men. Moreover, we should have been prepared with some refined reasonings to show that it was unlikely that a poet with so much hold on reality, in life and nature, both in solitude and in society, should have also a similar command over *un*reality: should possess a command not only of flesh and blood, but

* Tennyson, "Locksley Hall."

Digitized by Google

of the imaginary entities which the self-inworking fancy brings forth, — impalpable conceptions of mere mind; *quœdam simulacra modis pallentia miris;** thin ideas, which come we know not whence, and are given us we know not why. But unfortunately for this ingenious if not profound suggestion, Shakespeare in fact possessed the very faculty which it tends to prove that he would not possess. He could paint Poins and Falstaff, but he excelled also in fairy legends. He had such

> "Seething brains,
> Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
> More than cool reason ever comprehends."†

As, for example, the idea of Puck or Queen Mab, of Ariel, or such a passage as the following: —

> "*Puck.* How now, spirit! whither wander you?
> *Fairy.* Over hill, over dale,
> Thorough bush, thorough briar,
> Over park, over pale,
> Thorough flood, thorough fire,
> I do wander everywhere,
> Swifter than the moon's sphere;
> And I serve the fairy queen,
> To dew her orbs upon the green:
> The cowslips tall her pensioners be;
> In their gold coats spots you see,—
> Those be rubies, fairy favors,
> In those freckles live their savors:
> I must go seek some dewdrops here,
> And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear.
> Farewell, thou lob of spirits; I'll be gone:
> Our queen and all our elves come here anon.
> *Puck.* The king doth keep his revels here to-night:
> Take heed the queen come not within his sight.
> For Oberon is passing fell and wrath,
> Because that she, as her attendant, hath
> A lovely boy, stolen from an Indian king, —
> She never had so sweet a changeling;

* "Certain wonderfully pale phantoms." — Lucretius, i. 24.

† "Midsummer Night's Dream," v. 1.

Digitized by Google

And jealous Oberon would have the child
Knight of his train, to trace the forests wild:
But she perforce withholds the lovèd boy,
Crowns him with flowers, and makes him all her joy;
And now they never meet in grove or green,
By fountain clear or spangled starlight sheen,
But they do square, that all their elves, for fear,
Creep into acorn cups, and hide them there.

Fai. Either I mistake your shape and making quite,
Or else you are that shrewd and knavish sprite
Called Robin Goodfellow: are you not he
That frights the maidens of the villagery;
Skims milk; and sometime labors in the quern,
And bootless makes the breathless housewife churn;
And sometime makes the drink to bear no barm;
Misleads night-wanderers, laughing at their harm?
Those that Hobgoblin call you, and sweet Puck,
You do their work, and they shall have good luck:
Are not you he?

Puck. Fairy, thou speak'st aright;
I am that merry wanderer of the night.
I jest to Oberon, and make him smile,
When I a fat and bean-fed horse beguile,
Neighing in likeness of a filly foal:
And sometime lurk I in a gossip's bowl,
In very likeness of a roasted crab;
And when she drinks, against her lips I bob,
And on her withered dewlap pour the ale.
The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale,
Sometime for three-foot stool mistaketh me;
Then slip I from her bum, down topples she,
And "tailor" cries, and falls into a cough;
And then the whole quire hold their hips and loffe,
And waxen in their mirth, and neeze, and swear
A merrier hour was never wasted there.—
But room now, Fairy! here comes Oberon.

Fai. And here my mistress. — Would that he were gone!" *

Probably he believed in these things. Why not? everybody else believed in them then. They suit our climate. As the Greek mythology suits the keen Attic sky, the fairies, indistinct and half-defined, suit

* "Midsummer Night's Dream," ii. 1.

Digitized by Google

a land of mild mists and gentle airs. They confuse the "maidens of the villagery"; they are the paganism of the South of England.

Can it be made out what were Shakespeare's political views? We think it certainly can, and that without difficulty. From the English historical plays, it distinctly appears that he accepted, like everybody then, the Constitution of his country. His lot was not cast in an age of political controversy, nor of reform. What was, was from of old. The Wars of the Roses had made it very evident how much room there was for the evils incident to a hereditary monarchy (for instance, those of a controverted succession) and the evils incident to an aristocracy (as want of public spirit and audacious selfishness) to arise and continue within the realm of England. Yet they had not repelled, and had barely disconcerted, our conservative ancestors. They had not become Jacobins; they did not concur — and history, except in Shakespeare, hardly does justice to them — in Jack Cade's notion that the laws should come out of his mouth, or that the commonwealth was to be reformed by interlocutors in this scene:—

"*George.* I tell thee, Jack Cade the clothier means to dress the commonwealth, and turn it, and set a new nap upon it.

John. So he had need, for 'tis threadbare. Well, I say it was never merry world in England since gentlemen came up.

Geo. O miserable age! Virtue is not regarded in handicraftsmen.

John. The nobility think scorn to go in leather aprons.

Geo. Nay, more, the king's council are no good workmen.

John. True; and yet it is said, Labor in thy vocation; which is as much as to say as, Let the magistrates be laboring men: and therefore should we be magistrates.

Geo. Thou hast hit it; for there's no better sign of a brave mind than a hard hand.

John. I see them! I see them!"*

The English people did see them, and know them, and therefore have rejected them. An audience

* "2 King Henry VI.," iv. 2.

Digitized by Google

which, *bonâ fide*, entered into the merit of this scene, would never believe in everybody's suffrage. They would know that there is such a thing as nonsense; and when a man has once attained to that deep conception, you may be sure of him ever after. And though it would be absurd to say that Shakespeare originated this idea, or that the disbelief in simple democracy is owing to his teaching or suggestions, yet it may nevertheless be truly said that he shared in the peculiar knowledge of men, and also possessed the peculiar constitution of mind, which engenders this effect. The author of "Coriolanus" never believed in a mob, and did something towards preventing anybody else from doing so. But this political idea was not exactly the strongest in Shakespeare's mind. We think he had two other stronger, or as strong.

First, the feeling of loyalty to the ancient polity of this country,—not because it was good, but because it existed. In his time, people no more thought of the origin of the monarchy than they did of the origin of the Mendip Hills. The one had always been there, and so had the other. God (such was the common notion) had made both, and one as much as the other. Everywhere, in that age, the common modes of political speech assumed the existence of certain utterly national institutions, and would have been worthless and nonsensical except on that assumption. This national habit appears, as it ought to appear, in our national dramatist. A great divine tells us that the Thirty-nine Articles are "forms of thought,"—inevitable conditions of the religious understanding: in politics, "King, Lords, and Commons" are, no doubt, "forms of thought" to the great majority of Englishmen,—in these they live, and beyond these they never move. You can't reason on the removal (such is the notion) of the English Channel, nor St. George's Channel, nor can you of the English Constitution in like manner. It is to most of us, and to the happiest of us, a thing immutable; and such, no

Digitized by Google

doubt, it was to Shakespeare,—which if any one would have proved, let him refer at random to any page of the historical English plays.

The second peculiar tenet which we ascribe to his political creed is a disbelief in the middle classes. We fear he had no opinion of traders. In this age, we know, it is held that the keeping of a shop is equivalent to a political education. Occasionally, in country villages, where the trader sells everything, he is thought to know nothing, and has no vote; but in a town where he is a householder (as indeed he is in the country), and sells only one thing, there we assume that he knows everything. And this assumption is, in the opinion of some observers, confirmed by the fact. Sir Walter Scott used to relate that when, after a trip to London, he returned to Tweedside, he always found the people in that district knew more of politics than the Cabinet.* And so it is with the mercantile community in modern times. If you are a Chancellor of the Exchequer, it is possible that you may be acquainted with finance; but if you sell figs, it is certain that you will. Now, we nowhere find this laid down in Shakespeare. On the contrary, you will generally find that when a "citizen" is mentioned, he generally does or says something absurd. Shakespeare had a clear perception that it is possible to bribe a class as well as an individual, and that personal obscurity is but an insecure guarantee for political disinterestedness.

> "Moreover, he hath left you all his walks,
> His private arbors and new-planted orchards,
> On this side Tiber; he hath left them you,
> And to your heirs forever: common pleasures,
> To walk abroad and recreate yourselves.
> Here was a Cæsar! when comes such another?"†

He everywhere speaks in praise of a tempered and ordered and qualified polity, in which the pecuniary

* Letter to Sidmouth, April 20, 1821; in Lockhart, Vol. v., Chap. iii.
† "Julius Cæsar," iii. 2.

Digitized by Google

classes have a certain influence, but no more; and shows in every page a keen sensibility to the large views and high-souled energies, the gentle refinements and disinterested desires, in which those classes are likely to be especially deficient. He is particularly the poet of personal nobility, though throughout his writings there is a sense of freedom; just as Milton is the poet of freedom, though with an underlying reference to personal nobility: indeed, we might well expect our two poets to combine the appreciation of a rude and generous liberty with that of a delicate and refined nobleness, since it is the union of these two elements that characterizes our society and their experience.

There are two things,—good-tempered sense and ill-tempered sense. In our remarks on the character of Falstaff, we hope we have made it very clear that Shakespeare had the former; we think it nearly as certain that he possessed the latter also. An instance of this might be taken from that contempt for the perspicacity of the *bourgeoisie* which we have just been mentioning. It is within the limits of what may be called malevolent sense to take extreme and habitual pleasure in remarking the foolish opinions, the narrow notions, and [the] fallacious deductions which seem to cling to the pompous and prosperous man of business. Ask him his opinion of the currency question, and he puts "bills" and "bullion" together in a sentence, and he does not seem to care what he puts between them. But a more proper instance of (what has an odd sound) the malevolence of Shakespeare is to be found in the play of "Measure for Measure." We agree with Hazlitt that this play seems to be written, perhaps more than any other, *con amore* and with a relish; and this seems to be the reason why, notwithstanding the unpleasant nature of its plot and the absence of any very attractive character, it is yet one of the plays which take hold on the mind most easily and most powerfully.

Digitized by Google

Now, the entire character of Angelo, which is the expressive feature of the piece, is nothing but a successful embodiment of the pleasure, the malevolent pleasure, which a warm-blooded and expansive man takes in watching the rare, the dangerous and inanimate excesses of the constrained and cold-blooded. One seems to see Shakespeare, with his bright eyes and his large lips and buoyant face, watching with a pleasant excitement the excesses of his thin-lipped and calculating creation, as though they were the excesses of a real person. It is the complete picture of a natural hypocrite, who does not consciously disguise strong impulses, but whose very passions seem of their own accord to have disguised themselves and retreated into the recesses of the character, yet only to recur even more dangerously when their proper period is expired, when the will is cheated into security by their absence, and the world (and it may be the "judicious person" himself) is impressed with a sure reliance in his chilling and remarkable rectitude.

It has, we believe, been doubted whether Shakespeare was a man much conversant with the intimate society of women. Of course no one denies that he possessed a great knowledge of them, — a capital acquaintance with their excellences, faults, and foibles; but it has been thought that this was the result rather of imagination than of society, of creative fancy rather than of perceptive experience. Now, that Shakespeare possessed, among other singular qualities, a remarkable imaginative knowledge of women, is quite certain, for he was acquainted with the soliloquies of women. A woman, we suppose, like a man, must be alone in order to speak a soliloquy. After the greatest possible intimacy and experience, it must still be imagination, or fancy at least, which tells any man what a woman thinks of herself and to herself. There will still — get as near the limits of confidence or observation as you can — be a space which must be filled up from other means.

Digitized by Google

Men can only divine the truth; reserve, indeed, is a part of its charm. Seeing, therefore, that Shakespeare had done what necessarily and certainly must be done without experience, we were in some doubt whether he might not have dispensed with it altogether. A grave reviewer cannot know these things. We thought indeed of reasoning that since the delineations of women in Shakespeare were admitted to be first-rate, it should follow — at least there was a fair presumption — that no means or aid had been wanting to their production; and that consequently we ought, in the absence of distinct evidence, to assume that personal intimacy as well as solitary imagination had been concerned in their production. And we meant to cite the "questions about Octavia," which Lord Byron, who thought he had the means of knowing, declared to be "woman all over."*

But all doubt was removed and all conjecture set to rest by the coming in of an ably dressed friend from the external world, who mentioned that the language of Shakespeare's women was essentially female language; that there were certain points and peculiarities in the English of cultivated English-women which made it a language of itself, which must be heard familiarly in order to be known. And he added, "except a greater use of words of Latin derivation, as was natural in an age when ladies received a learned education, a few words not now proper, a few conceits that were the fashion of the time, and there is the very same English in the women's speeches in Shakespeare." He quoted —

> "Think not I love him, though I ask for him:
> 'Tis but a peevish boy; — yet he talks well; —
> But what care I for words? yet words do well,
> When he that speaks them pleases those that hear.
> It is a pretty youth: — not very pretty: —
> But sure, he's proud; and yet his pride becomes him:
> He'll make a proper man. The best thing in him
> Is his complexion; and faster than his tongue

* Journal, Nov. 16, 1813.

Digitized by Google

Did make offense, his eye did heal it up.
He is not tall; yet for his years he's tall:
His leg is but so-so; and yet 'tis well.
There was a pretty redness in his lip;
A little riper and more lusty red
Than that mixed in his cheek: 'twas just the difference
Betwixt the constant red and mingled damask.
There be some women, Silvius, had they marked him
In parcels as I did, would have gone near
To fall in love with him: but for my part,
I love him not, nor hate him not; and yet
I have more cause to hate him than to love him:
For what had he to do to chide at me?
He said my eyes were black, and my hair black,
And, now I am remembered, scorned at me;
I marvel why I answered not again:
But that's all one;"*

and the passage of Perdita's cited before about the daffodils that

"Take
The winds of March with beauty; violets dim,
But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes,
Or Cytherea's breath;"

and said that these were conclusive. But we have not, ourselves, heard young ladies converse in that manner.

Perhaps it is in his power of delineating women that Shakespeare contrasts most strikingly with the greatest master of the art of dialogue in antiquity,—we mean Plato. It will no doubt be said that the delineation of women did not fall within Plato's plan; that men's life was in that age so separate and predominant that it could be delineated by itself and apart: and no doubt these remarks are very true. But what led Plato to form that plan? What led him to select that peculiar argumentative aspect of life, in which the masculine element is in so high a degree superior? We believe that he did it because he felt that he could paint that kind of scene much

* "As You Like It," iii. 5.

Digitized by Google

better than he could paint any other. If a person will consider the sort of conversation that was held in the cool summer morning, when Socrates was knocked up early to talk definitions and philosophy with Protagoras, he will feel, not only that women would fancy such dialogues to be certainly stupid, and very possibly to be without meaning, but also that the side of character which is there represented is one from which not only the feminine but even the epicene element is nearly if not perfectly excluded. It is the intellect surveying and delineating intellectual characteristics. We have a dialogue of thinking faculties: the character of every man is delineated by showing us, not his mode of action or feeling, but his mode of thinking, alone and by itself. The pure mind, purged of all passion and affection, strives to view and describe others in like manner; and the singularity is, that the likenesses so taken are so good, — that the accurate copying of the merely intellectual effects and indications of character gives so true and so firm an impression of the whole character, — that a daguerreotype of the mind should almost seem to be a delineation of the life. But though in the hand of a consummate artist such a way of representation may in some sense succeed in the case of men, it would certainly seem sure to fail in the case of women. The mere intellect of a woman is a mere nothing: it originates nothing, it transmits nothing, it retains nothing; it has little life of its own, and therefore it can hardly be expected to attain any vigor. Of the lofty Platonic world of the ideas, which the soul in the old doctrine was to arrive at by pure and continuous reasoning, women were never expected to know anything. Plato, though Mr. Grote denies that he was a practical man, was much too practical for that: he reserved his teaching for people whose belief was regulated and induced in some measure by abstract investigations; who had an interest in the pure and (as it were) geometrical truth

Digitized by Google

itself; who had an intellectual character (apart from and accessory to their other character) capable of being viewed as a large and substantial existence. Shakespeare's being, like a woman's, worked as a whole. He was capable of intellectual abstractedness, but commonly he was touched with the sense of earth. One thinks of him as firmly set on our coarse world of common clay, but from it he could paint the moving essence of thoughtful feeling,—which is the best refinement of the best women. Imogen or Juliet would have thought little of the conversation of Gorgias.

On few subjects has more nonsense been written than on the learning of Shakespeare. In former times the established tenet was, that he was acquainted with the entire range of the Greek and Latin classics, and familiarly resorted to Sophocles and Æschylus as guides and models. This creed reposed not so much on any painful or elaborate criticism of Shakespeare's plays, as on one of the *a priori* assumptions permitted to the indolence of the wise old world: it was then considered clear, by all critics, that no one could write good English who could not also write bad Latin. Questioning skepticism has rejected this axiom, and refuted with contemptuous facility the slight attempt which had been made to verify this case of it from the evidence of the plays themselves. But the new school, not content with showing that Shakespeare was no formed or elaborate scholar, propounded the idea that he was quite ignorant, just as Mr. Croker "demonstrates" that Napoleon Bonaparte could scarcely write or read. The answer is, that Shakespeare wrote his plays, and that those plays show not only a very powerful, but also a very cultivated mind. A hard student Shakespeare was not, yet he was a happy and pleased reader of interesting books. He was a natural reader: when a book was dull he put it down, when it looked fascinating he took it up; and the consequence is, that

Digitized by Google

he remembered and mastered what he read. Lively books, read with lively interest, leave strong and living recollections. The instructors, no doubt, say that they ought not to do so, and inculcate the necessity of dry reading; yet the good sense of a busy public has practically discovered that what is read easily is recollected easily, and what is read with difficulty is remembered with more. It is certain that Shakespeare read the novels of his time, for he has founded on them the stories of his plays; he read Plutarch, for his words still live in the dialogue of the "proud Roman" plays; and it is remarkable that Montaigne is the only philosopher that Shakespeare can be proved to have read, because he deals more than any other philosopher with the first impressions of things which exist. On the other hand, it may be doubted if Shakespeare would have perused his commentators. Certainly he would have never read a page of this review; and we go so far as to doubt whether he would have been pleased with the admirable discourses of M. Guizot, which we ourselves, though ardent admirers of his style and ideas, still find it a little difficult to *read;* and what would he have thought of the following speculations of an anonymous individual, whose notes have been recently published in a fine octavo by Mr. Collier, and according to the periodical essayists, "contribute valuable suggestions to the illustration of the immortal bard"?

"THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA.

'*Act I. Scene* 1.

'P. 92. The reading of the subsequent line has hitherto been

"'Tis true; for you are over boots in love;"

but the manuscript corrector of the Folio, 1632, has changed it to

"'Tis true; *but* you are over boots in love,"

which seems more consistent with the course of the dialogue: for *Proteus* remarking that Leander had been "more than over shoes in love" with Hero, *Valentine* answers that *Proteus* was even more

Digitized by Google

deeply in love than Leander. *Proteus* observes of the fable of Hero and Leander—

> "That's a deep story of a deeper love,
> *For* he was more than over shoes in love."

Valentine retorts—

> "'Tis true; *but* you are over boots in love."

For instead of *but* was perhaps caught by the compositor from the preceding line."

It is difficult to fancy Shakespeare perusing a volume of such annotations, though we allow that we admire them ourselves. As to the controversy on his school learning, we have only to say that though the alleged imitations of the Greek tragedians are mere nonsense, yet there is clear evidence that Shakespeare received the ordinary grammar-school education of his time, and that he had derived from the pain and suffering of several years, not exactly an acquaintance with Greek or Latin, but, like Eton boys, a firm conviction that there are such languages.

Another controversy has been raised as to whether Shakespeare was religious. In the old editions it is commonly enough laid down that when writing his plays he had no desire to fill the Globe Theater, but that his intentions were of the following description:—"In this play ["Cymbeline"] Shakespeare has strongly depicted the frailties of our nature, and the effect of vicious passions on the human mind. In the fate of the Queen we behold the adept in perfidy justly sacrificed by the arts she had, with unnatural ambition, prepared for others; and in reviewing her death and that of Cloten, we may easily call to mind the words of Scripture," etc. And of "King Lear" it is observed with great confidence, that Shakespeare, "*no doubt*, intended to mark particularly the afflicting character of children's ingratitude to their parents, and the conduct of Goneril and Regan to each other; *especially* in the former's poisoning the latter, and laying hands on *herself*, we are taught that those

Digitized by Google

who want gratitude towards their parents (who gave them their being, fed them, nurtured them to *man's* estate) will not scruple to commit more barbarous crimes, and easily to forget that by destroying their body they destroy their soul also." And Dr. Ulrici, a very learned and illegible writer, has discovered that in every one of his plays Shakespeare had in view the inculcation of the peculiar sentiments and doctrines of the Christian religion, and considers the "Midsummer Night's Dream" to be a specimen of the lay or amateur sermon. This is what Dr. Ulrici thinks of Shakespeare: but what would Shakespeare have thought of Dr. Ulrici? We believe that "*Via*, Goodman Dull," is nearly the remark which the learned professor would have received from the poet to whom his very careful treatise is devoted. And yet, without prying into the Teutonic mysteries, a gentleman of missionary aptitudes might be tempted to remark that in many points Shakespeare is qualified to administer a rebuke to people of the prevalent religion. Meeting a certain religionist is like striking the corner of a wall: he is possessed of a firm and rigid persuasion that you must leave off this and that, stop, cry, be anxious, be advised, and above all things refrain from doing what you like, for nothing is so bad for any one as that. And in quite another quarter of the religious hemisphere we occasionally encounter gentlemen who have most likely studied at the feet of Dr. Ulrici, or at least of an equivalent Gamaliel, and who, when we or such as we, speaking the language of mortality, remark of a pleasing friend, "Nice fellow, so and so! Good fellow as ever lived!" reply sternly, upon an unsuspecting reviewer, with—"Sir, is he an *earnest* man?" To which, in some cases, we are unable to return a sufficient answer. Yet Shakespeare (differing, in that respect at least, from the disciples of Carlyle) had, we suspect, an objection to grim people, and we fear would have liked the society of Mercutio better than that of a dreary divine, and preferred Ophelia or

Digitized by Google

"that Juliet" to a female philanthropist of sinewy aspect. And seriously, if this world is not all evil, he who has understood and painted it best must probably have some good. If the underlying and almighty essence of this world be good, then it is likely that the writer who most deeply approached to that essence will be himself good. There is a religion of week-days as well as of Sundays, of "cakes and ale"* as well as of pews and altar cloths. This England lay before Shakespeare as it lies before us all, with its green fields, and its long hedgerows, and its many trees, and its great towns, and its endless hamlets, and its motley society, and its long history, and its bold exploits, and its gathering power; and he saw that they were good. To him, perhaps, more than to any one else, has it been given to see that they were a great unity, a great religious object; that if you could only descend to the inner life, to the deep things, to the secret principles of its noble vigor, to the essence of character, to what we know of Hamlet and seem to fancy of Ophelia, we might, so far as we are capable of so doing, understand the nature which God has made. Let us, then, think of him not as a teacher of dry dogmas or a sayer of hard sayings, but as

> "A priest to us all,
> Of the wonder and bloom of the world,"†

a teacher of the hearts of men and women; one from whom may be learned something of that inmost principle that ever modulates

> "With murmurs of the air,
> And motions of the forests and the sea,
> And voice of living beings, and woven hymns
> Of night and day, and the deep heart of man."‡

We must pause, lest our readers reject us, as the Bishop of Durham the poor curate, because he was "mystical and confused."

* "Twelfth Night," iii. 2. † Matthew Arnold, "The Youth of Nature." ‡ Shelley, "Alastor."

Digitized by Google

Yet it must be allowed that Shakespeare was worldly; and the proof of it is, that he succeeded in the world. Possibly this is the point on which we are most richly indebted to tradition. We see generally, indeed, in Shakespeare's works, the popular author, the successful dramatist: there is a life and play in his writings rarely to be found except in those who have had habitual good luck, and who, by the tact of experience, feel the minds of their readers at every word, as a good rider feels the mouth of his horse. But it would have been difficult quite to make out whether the profits so accruing had been profitably invested, — whether the genius to create such illusions was accompanied with the care and judgment necessary to put out their proceeds properly in actual life. We could only have said that there was a general impression of entire calmness and equability in his principal works rarely to be found where there is much pain, which usually makes gaps in the work and dislocates the balance of the mind. But happily here, and here almost alone, we are on sure historical ground. The reverential nature of Englishmen has carefully preserved what they thought the great excellence of their poet, — that he made a fortune.* It is certain that Shakespeare was proprietor of the Globe Theater, that he made money there, and invested the same in land at Stratford-on-Avon; and probably no circumstance in his life ever gave him so much pleasure. It was a great thing that he, the son of the wool-comber, the poacher, the good-for-nothing, the vagabond (for so we fear the phrase

*The only antiquarian thing which can be fairly called an anecdote of Shakespeare is, that Mrs. Alleyne, a shrewd woman in those times, and married to Mr. Alleyne, the founder of Dulwich Hospital, was one day, in the absence of her husband, applied to on some matter by a player who gave a reference to Mr. Hemminge (the "notorious" Mr. Hemminge, the commentators say) and to Mr. Shakespeare of the Globe, and that the latter, when referred to, said, "Yes, certainly, he knew him, and he was a rascal and good-for-nothing." The proper speech of a substantial man, such as it is worth while to give a reference to.— B.

Digitized by Google

went in Shakespeare's youth), should return upon the old scene a substantial man, a person of capital, a freeholder, a gentleman to be respected, and over whom even a burgess could not affect the least superiority. The great pleasure in life is doing what people say you cannot do. Why did Mr. Disraeli take the duties of the Exchequer with so much relish? Because people said he was a novelist, an *ad captandum* man, and — *monstrum horrendum!* — a Jew that could not add up. No doubt it pleased his inmost soul to do the work of the red-tape people better than those who could do nothing else. And so with Shakespeare: it pleased him to be respected, by those whom he had respected with boyish reverence but who had rejected the imaginative man, on their own ground and in their own subject, by the only title which they would regard, — in a word, as a moneyed man. We seem to see him eying the burgesses with good-humored fellowship and genial (though suppressed and half-unconscious) contempt, drawing out their old stories and acquiescing in their foolish notions, with everything in his head and easy sayings upon his tongue, a full mind, and a deep dark eye that played upon an easy scene; now in fanciful solitude, now in cheerful society; now occupied with deep thoughts, now and equally so with trivial recreations, forgetting the dramatist in the man of substance, and the poet in the happy companion; beloved and even respected, with a hope for every one and a smile for all.

Digitized by Google

*JOHN MILTON.**

(1859.)

THE "Life of Milton," by Prof. Masson, is a difficulty for the critics. It is very laborious, very learned, and in the main, we believe, very accurate; it is exceedingly long, — there are 780 pages in this volume, and there are to be two volumes more; it touches on very many subjects, and each of these has been investigated to the very best of the author's ability. No one can wish to speak with censure of a book on which so much genuine labor has been expended; and yet we are bound, as true critics, to say that we think it has been composed upon a principle that is utterly erroneous. In justice to ourselves we must explain our meaning.

There are two methods on which biography may consistently be written. The first of these is what we may call the "exhaustive" method. Every fact which is known about the hero may be told us; everything which he did, everything which he would not do, everything which other people did to him, everything which other people would not do to him, may be narrated at full length. We may have a complete picture of all the events of his life; of all which he underwent, and all which he achieved. We

---

*The Life of John Milton, narrated in connection with the Political, Ecclesiastical, and Literary History of his time. By David Masson, M. A., Professor of English Literature in University College, London. Cambridge: Macmillan.

An Account of the Life, Opinions, and Writings of John Milton. By Thomas Keightley; with an Introduction to "Paradise Lost." London: Chapman & Hall.

The Poems of Milton, with Notes by Thomas Keightley. London: Chapman & Hall.

Digitized by Google

may, as Mr. Carlyle expresses it, have a complete account "of his effect upon the universe, and of the effect of the universe upon him."* We admit that biographies of this species would be very long, and generally very tedious; we know that the world could not contain very many of them: but nevertheless, the principle on which they may be written is intelligible.

The second method on which the life of a man may be written is the selective. Instead of telling everything, we may choose what we will tell. We may select out of the numberless events, from among the innumerable actions of his life, those events and those actions which exemplify his true character, which prove to us what were the true limits of his talents, what was the degree of his deficiencies, which were his defects, which his vices; in a word, we may select the traits and the particulars which seem to give us the best idea of the man as he lived and as he was. On this side the Flood, as Sydney Smith would have said, we should have fancied that this was the only practicable principle on which biographies can be written about persons of whom many details are recorded. For ancient heroes the exhaustive method is possible: all that can be known of them is contained in a few short passages of Greek and Latin, and it is quite possible to say whatever can be said about every one of these; the result would not be unreasonably bulky, though it might be dull. But in the case of men who have lived in the thick of the crowded modern world, no such course is admissible; overmuch *may* be said, and we must choose what we will say. Biographers, however, are rarely bold enough to adopt the selective method consistently. They have, we suspect, the fear of the critics before their eyes. They do not like that it should be said that "the work of the learned gentleman contains serious omissions: the events of 1562 are not mentioned; those of October, 1579, are narrated but very cursorily"; and we fear that in any case such

* Review of Lockhart's Scott.

Digitized by Google

remarks will be made. Very learned people are pleased to show that they know what is *not* in the book; sometimes they may hint that perhaps the author did not know it, or surely he would have mentioned it. But a biographer who wishes to write what most people of cultivation will be pleased to read must be courageous enough to face the pain of such censures. He must choose, as we have explained, the characteristic parts of his subject: and all that he has to take care of besides is, so to narrate them that their characteristic elements shall be shown; to give such an account of the general career as may make it clear what these chosen events really were, — to show their respective bearings to one another; to delineate what is expressive in such a manner as to make it expressive.

This plan of biography is, however, by no means that of Mr. Masson: he has no dread of overgrown bulk and overwhelming copiousness. He finds indeed what we have called the "exhaustive method" insufficient: he not only wishes to narrate in full the life of Milton, but to add those of his contemporaries likewise; he seems to wish to tell us not only what Milton did, but also what every one else did in Great Britain during his lifetime. He intends his book to be not

> "merely a biography of Milton, but also in some sort a continuous history of his time. . . . The suggestions of Milton's life have indeed determined the tracks of these historical researches and expositions, sometimes through the literature of the period, sometimes through its civil and ecclesiastical politics; but the extent to which I have pursued them, and the space which I have assigned to them, have been determined by my desire to present, by their combination, something like a connected historical view of British thought and British society in general prior to the great Revolution."

We need not do more than observe that this union of heterogeneous aims must always end, as it has in this case, in the production of a work at once overgrown and incomplete. A great deal which has only a slight bearing on the character of Milton is

Digitized by Google

inserted; much that is necessary to a true history of "British thought and British society" is of necessity left out. The period of Milton's life which is included in the published volume makes the absurdity especially apparent. In middle life Milton was a great controversialist on contemporary topics; and though it would not be proper for a biographer to load his pages with a full account of all such controversies, yet some notice of the most characteristic of them would be expected from him. In this part of Milton's life some reference to public events would be necessary; and we should not severely censure a biographer if the great interest of those events induced him to stray a little from his topic. But the first thirty years of Milton's life require a very different treatment. He passed those years in the ordinary musings of a studious and meditative youth; it was the period of "Lycidas" and "Comus"; he then dreamed the

> "Sights which youthful poets dream
> On summer eve by haunted stream."*

We do not wish to have this part of his life disturbed, to a greater extent than may be necessary, with the harshness of public affairs. Nor is it necessary that it should be so disturbed: a life of poetic retirement requires but little reference to anything except itself; in a biography of Mr. Tennyson we should not expect to hear of the Reform Bill or the Corn Laws. Mr. Masson is, however, of a different opinion: he thinks it necessary to tell us, not only all which Milton did, but everything also that he might have heard of.

The biography of Mr. Keightley is on a very different scale: he tells the story of Milton's career in about half a small volume. Probably this is a little too concise, and the narrative is somewhat dry and bare. It is often, however, acute, and is always clear; and even were its defects greater than they

*"L'Allegro."

Digitized by Google

are, we should think it unseemly to criticize the last work of one who has performed so many useful services to literature with extreme severity.

The bare outline of Milton's life is very well known. We have all heard that he was born in the latter years of King James, just when Puritanism was collecting its strength for the approaching struggle; that his father and mother were quiet good people, inclined, but not immoderately, to that persuasion; that he went up to Cambridge early, and had some kind of dissension with the authorities there; that the course of his youth was in a singular degree pure and staid; that in boyhood he was a devourer of books, and that he early became, and always remained, a severely studious man; that he married, and had difficulties of a peculiar character with his first wife; that he wrote on divorce; that after the death of his first wife, he married a second time a lady who died very soon, and a third time a person who survived him more than fifty years; that he wrote early poems of singular beauty, which we still read; that he traveled in Italy, and exhibited his learning in the academies there; that he plunged deep in the theological and political controversies of his time; that he kept a school, — or rather, in our more modern phrase, took pupils; that he was a republican of a peculiar kind, and of "no church," which Dr. Johnson thought dangerous;* that he was Secretary for Foreign Languages under the Long Parliament, and retained that office after the *coup d'état* of Cromwell; that he defended the death of Charles I., and became blind from writing a book in haste upon that subject; that after the Restoration he was naturally in a position of some danger and much difficulty; that in the midst of that difficulty he wrote "Paradise Lost"; that he did not fail in "heart or hope,"† but lived for fourteen years after the destruction of all for which he had labored, in serene retirement, "though fallen on evil days,

*Life of Milton. †Sonnet xix.

Digitized by Google

though fallen on evil times,"* — all this we have heard from our boyhood. How much is wanting to complete the picture — how many traits, both noble and painful, might be recovered from the past — we shall never know, till some biographer skilled in interpreting the details of human nature shall select this subject for his art. All that we can hope to do in an essay like this is, to throw together some miscellaneous remarks on the character of the Puritan poet, and on the peculiarities of his works; and if in any part of them we may seem to make unusual criticisms, and to be over-ready with depreciation or objection, our excuse must be, that we wish to paint a likeness, and that the harsher features of the subject should have a prominence even in an outline.

There are two kinds of goodness conspicuous in the world, and often made the subject of contrast there; for which, however, we seem to want exact words, and which we are obliged to describe rather vaguely and incompletely. These characters may in one aspect be called the "sensuous" and the "ascetic." The character of the first is that which is almost personified in the poet-king of Israel, whose actions and whose history have been "improved" so often by various writers that it now seems trite even to allude to them. Nevertheless, the particular virtues and the particular career of David seem to embody the idea of what may be called "sensuous goodness" far more completely than a living being in general comes near to an abstract idea. There may have been shades in the actual man which would have modified the resemblance; but in the portrait which has been handed down to us, the traits are perfect and the approximation exact. The principle of this character is its sensibility to outward stimulus: it is moved by all which occurs, stirred by all which happens, open to the influences of whatever it sees, hears, or meets with. The certain consequence of this

* "Though fallen on evil days,
On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues." — "Paradise Lost," Book vii.

Digitized by Google

mental constitution is a peculiar liability to temptation. Men are, according to the divine, "put upon their trial through the senses." It is through the constant suggestions of the outer world that our minds are stimulated, that our will has the chance of a choice, that moral life becomes possible. The sensibility to this external stimulus brings with it, when men have it to excess, an unusual access of moral difficulty. Everything acts on them, and everything has a chance of turning them aside; the most tempting things act upon them very deeply, and their influence, in consequence, is extreme. Naturally, therefore, the errors of such men are great. We need not point the moral: —

> "Dizzied faith and guilt and woe;
> Loftiest aims by earth defiled,
> Gleams of wisdom sin-beguiled,
> Sated power's tyrannic mood,
> Counsels shared with men of blood,
> Sad success, parental tears,
> And a dreary gift of years."*

But on the other hand, the excellence of such men has a charm, a kind of sensuous sweetness, that is its own. Being conscious of frailty, they are tender to the imperfect; being sensitive to this world, they sympathize with the world; being familiar with all the moral incidents of life, their goodness has a richness and a complication: they fascinate their own age, and in their deaths they are "not divided" from the love of others. Their peculiar sensibility gives a depth to their religion: it is at once deeper and more human than that of other men. As their sympathetic knowledge of those whom they have seen is great, so it is with their knowledge of Him whom they have not seen; and as is their knowledge, so is their love: it is deep, from their nature; rich and intimate, from the variety of their experience; chastened by the ever-present sense of their weakness and of its consequences.

* John Henry Newman's "Call of David."

Digitized by Google

In extreme opposition to this is the ascetic species of goodness. This is not, as is sometimes believed, a self-produced ideal,—a simply voluntary result of discipline and restraint. Some men have by nature what others have to elaborate by effort. Some men have a repulsion from the world. All of us have, in some degree, a protective instinct; an impulse, that is to say, to start back from what may trouble us, to shun what may fascinate us, to avoid what may tempt us. On the moral side of human nature this preventive check is occasionally imperious: it holds the whole man under its control,—makes him recoil from the world, be offended at its amusements, be repelled by its occupations, be scared by its sins. The consequences of this tendency, when it is thus in excess, upon the character are very great and very singular. It secludes a man in a sort of natural monastery; he lives in a kind of moral solitude: and the effects of his isolation, for good and for evil, on his disposition are very many. The best result is a singular capacity for meditative religion. Being aloof from what is earthly, such persons are shut up with what is spiritual; being unstirred by the incidents of time, they are alone with the eternal; rejecting this life, they are alone with what is beyond. According to the measure of their minds, men of this removed and secluded excellence become eminent for a settled and brooding piety, for a strong and predominant religion. In human life, too, in a thousand ways, their isolated excellence is apparent. They walk through the whole of it with an abstinence from sense, a zeal of morality, a purity of ideal, which other men have not; their religion has an imaginative grandeur, and their life something of an unusual impeccability: and these are obviously singular excellences. But the deficiencies to which the same character tends are equally singular. In the first place, their isolation gives them a certain pride in themselves and an inevitable ignorance of others. They

Digitized by Google

are secluded by their constitutional δαίμων from life; they are repelled from the pursuits which others care for; they are alarmed at the amusements which others enjoy. In consequence, they trust in their own thoughts; they come to magnify both them and themselves, — for being able to think and to retain them. The greater the nature of the man, the greater is this temptation. His thoughts are greater, and in consequence the greater is his tendency to prize them, the more extreme is his tendency to overrate them. This pride, too, goes side by side with a want of sympathy. Being aloof from others, such a mind is unlike others; and it feels, and sometimes it feels bitterly, its own unlikeness. Generally, however, it is too wrapped up in its own exalted thoughts to be sensible of the pain of moral isolation; it stands apart from others, unknowing and unknown. It is deprived of moral experience in two ways, — it is not tempted itself, and it does not comprehend the temptations of others. And this defect of moral experience is almost certain to produce two effects, one practical and the other speculative. When such a man is wrong, he will be apt to believe that he is right. If his own judgment err, he will not have the habit of checking it by the judgment of others: he will be accustomed to think most men wrong; differing from them would be no proof of error, agreeing with them would rather be a basis for suspicion. He may, too, be very wrong, for the conscience of no man is perfect on all sides. The strangeness of secluded excellence will be sometimes deeply shaded by very strange errors. To be commonly above others, still more to think yourself above others, is to be below them every now and then, and sometimes much below. Again, on the speculative side, this defect of moral experience penetrates into the distinguishing excellence of the character, — its brooding and meditative religion. Those who see life under only one aspect can see religion under only one likewise. This world is needful to

Digitized by Google

interpret what is beyond; the seen must explain the unseen. It is from a tried and a varied and a troubled moral life that the deepest and truest idea of God arises. The ascetic character wants these; therefore in its religion there will be a harshness of outline, — a bareness, so to say, — as well as a grandeur. In life we may look for a singular purity; but also, and with equal probability, for singular self-confidence, a certain unsympathizing straitness, and perhaps a few singular errors.

The character of the ascetic or austere species of goodness is almost exactly embodied in Milton. Men, indeed, are formed on no ideal type: human nature has tendencies too various, and circumstances too complex; all men's characters have sides and aspects not to be comprehended in a single definition: but in this case, the extent to which the character of the man as we find it delineated approaches to the moral abstraction which we sketch from theory is remarkable. The whole being of Milton may, in some sort, be summed up in the great commandment of the austere character, "Reverence thyself" We find it expressed in almost every one of his singular descriptions of himself, — of those striking passages which are scattered through all his works, and which add to whatever interest may intrinsically belong to them one of the rarest of artistic charms, that of magnanimous autobiography. They have been quoted a thousand times, but one of them may perhaps be quoted again:

"I had my time, readers as others have who have good learning bestowed upon them, to be sent to those places where, the opinion was, it might be soonest attained; and as the manner is, was not unstudied in those authors which are most commended: whereof some were grave orators and historians, whose matter methought I loved indeed, but as my age then was, so I understood them; others were the smooth elegiac poets, whereof the schools are not scarce, whom both for the pleasing sound of their numerous writing, which in imitation I found most easy and most agreeable to nature's part in me, and for their matter, which what it is there be few who know not, I was so allured to read, that no recreation came to me better

Digitized by Google

welcome. For that it was then those years with me which are excused, though they be least severe, I may be saved the labor to remember ye. Whence having observed them to account it the chief glory of their wit, in that they were ablest to judge, to praise, and by that could esteem themselves worthiest to love, those high perfections which under one or other name they took to celebrate, I thought with myself by every instinct and presage of nature, which is not wont to be false, that what emboldened them to this task might with such diligence as they used embolden me; and that what judgment, wit, or elegance was my share would herein best appear, and best value itself, by how much more wisely and with more love of virtue I should choose (let rude ears be absent) the object of not unlike praises. For albeit these thoughts to some will seem virtuous and commendable, to others only pardonable, to a third sort perhaps idle, yet the mentioning of them now will end in serious.

"Nor blame it, readers, in those years to propose to themselves such a reward, as the noblest dispositions above other things in this life have sometimes preferred; whereof not to be sensible when good and fair in one person meet, argues both a gross and shallow judgment, and withal an ungentle and swainish breast. For by the firm settling of these persuasions, I became, to my best memory, so much a proficient, that if I found those authors anywhere speaking unworthy things of themselves, or unchaste of those names which before they had extolled, this effect it wrought with me, — from that time forward their art I still applauded, but the men I deplored; and above them all, preferred the two famous renowners of *Beatrice* and *Laura*, who never write but honor of them to whom they devote their verse, displaying sublime and pure thoughts without transgression. And long it was not after, when I was confirmed in this opinion, — that he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things ought himself to be a true poem; that is, a composition and pattern of the best and honorablest things: not presuming to sing high praises of heroic men or famous cities, unless he have in himself the experience and the practice of all that which is praiseworthy."*

It may be fanciful to add, and we may be laughed at, but we believe that the self-reverencing propensity was a little aided by his singular personal beauty. All the describers of his youth concur in telling us

* "Apology for Smectymnuus."

Digitized by Google

that this was very remarkable. Mr. Masson has the following account of it:—

"When Milton left Cambridge in July, 1632, he was twenty-three years and eight months old. In stature, therefore, at least, he was already whatever he was to be. 'In stature,' he says himself at a later period, when driven to speak on the subject, 'I confess I am not tall, but still of what is nearer to middle height than to little; and what if I were of little, of which stature have often been very great men both in peace and war — though why should that be called little which is great enough for virtue?' ('Staturâ, fateor non sum procerâ, sed quæ mediocri tamen quàm parvæ propior sit; sed quid si parvâ, quâ et summi sæpe tum pace tum bello viri fuere — quanquam parva cur dicitur, quæ ad virtutem satis magna est?') This is precise enough; but we have Aubrey's words to the same effect. 'He was scarce so tall as I am,' says Aubrey; to which, to make it more intelligible, he appends this marginal note, — '*Qu. Quot* feet I am high? *Resp.* Of middle stature': *i. e.*, Milton was a little under middle height. 'He had light-brown hair,' continues Aubrey, — putting the word 'abrown' (auburn) in the margin by way of synonym for 'light brown'; — 'his complexion exceeding fair; oval face; his eye a dark gray.'"

We are far from accusing Milton of personal vanity: his character was too enormous, if we may be allowed so to say, for a fault so petty. But a little tinge of excessive self-respect will cling to those who can admire themselves. Ugly men are and ought to be ashamed of their existence; Milton was not so.

The peculiarities of the austere type of character stand out in Milton more remarkably than in other men who partake of it, because of the extreme strength of his nature. In reading him this is the first thing that strikes us. We seem to have left the little world of ordinary writers. The words of some authors are said to have "hands and feet"; they seem, that is, to have a vigor and animation which only belong to things which live and move. Milton's words have not this animal life, — there is no rude energy about them; but on the other hand, they have or seem to have a soul, a spirit which other words have not. He was early aware that what he

Digitized by Google

wrote, "by certain vital signs it had," was such as the world would not "willingly let die."* After two centuries we feel the same. There is a solemn and firm music in the lines; a brooding sublimity haunts them; the spirit of the great writer moves over the face of the page. In life there seems to have been the same peculiar strength that his works suggest to us. His moral tenacity is amazing: he took his own course, and he kept his own course; and we may trace in his defects the same characteristics. "Energy and ill temper," some say, "are the same thing;" and though this is a strong exaggeration, yet there is a basis of truth in it. People who labor much will be cross if they do not obtain that for which they labor; those who desire vehemently will be vexed if they do not obtain that which they desire. As is the strength of the impelling tendency, so, other things being equal, is the pain which it will experience if it be baffled. Those, too, who are set on what is high will be proportionately offended by the intrusion of what is low. Accordingly, Milton is described by those who knew him as "a harsh and choleric man." "He had," we are told, "a gravity in his temper, not melancholy, or not till the latter part of his life, not sour, not morose or ill-natured, but a certain severity of mind; a mind not condescending to little things:"† and this although his daughter remembered that he was delightful company, the life of conversation, and that he was so "on account of a flow of subject, and an unaffected cheerfulness and civility." Doubtless this may have been so when he was at ease, and at home; but there are unmistakable traces of the harsher tendency in almost all his works.

Some of the peculiarities of the ascetic character were likewise augmented by his studious disposition. This began very early in life, and continued till the end. "My father," he says, "destined me . . . to the study of polite literature, which I embraced with such

* "Reason of Church Government," introduction to Book iii.

† Phillips.

Digitized by Google

avidity, that from the twelfth year of my age I hardly ever retired to rest from my studies till midnight; which was the first source of injury to my eyes, to the natural weakness of which were added frequent headaches: all of which not retarding my eagerness after knowledge, he took care to have me instructed—" etc.* Every page of his works shows the result of this education. In spite of the occupations of manhood, and the blindness and melancholy of old age, he still continued to have his principal pleasure in that "studious and select" reading, which, though often curiously transmuted, is perpetually involved in the very texture of his works. We need not stay to observe how a habit in itself so austere conduces to the development of an austere character. Deep study, especially deep study which haunts and rules the imagination, necessarily removes men from life, absorbs them in themselves; purifies their conduct, with some risk of isolating their sympathies; develops that loftiness of mood which is gifted with deep inspirations and indulged with great ideas, but which tends in its excess to engender a contempt for others, and a self-appreciation which is even more displeasing to them.

These same tendencies were aggravated also by two defects which are exceedingly rare in great English authors, and which perhaps Milton alone amongst those of the highest class is in a remarkable degree chargeable with; we mean a deficiency in humor, and a deficiency in a knowledge of plain human nature. Probably when, after the lapse of ages, English literature is looked at in its larger features only, and in comparison with other literatures which have preceded or which may follow it, the critics will lay down that its most striking characteristic as a whole is its involution, so to say, in life; the degree to which its book life resembles real life; the extent to which the motives, dispositions, and actions of common busy persons are represented in a medium which would

*Translated by Keightley, from "Defensio Secunda."

Digitized by Google

seem likely to give us peculiarly the ideas of secluded and the tendencies of meditative men. It is but an aspect of this fact, that English literature abounds—some critics will say abounds excessively—with humor. This is in some sense the imaginative element of ordinary life,—the relieving charm, partaking at once of contrast and similitude, which gives a human and an intellectual interest to the world of clowns and cottages, of fields and farmers. The degree to which Milton is deficient in this element is conspicuous in every page of his writings where its occurrence could be looked for; and if we do not always look for it, this is because the subjects of his most remarkable works are on a removed elevation, where ordinary life, the world of "cakes and ale," is never thought of and never expected. It is in his dramas, as we should expect, that Milton shows this deficiency the most. "Citizens" never talk in his pages, as they do in Shakespeare. We feel instinctively that Milton's eye had never rested with the same easy pleasure on the easy, ordinary, shopkeeping world. Perhaps, such is the complication of art, it is on the most tragic occasions that we feel this want the most. It may seem an odd theory, and yet we believe it to be a true principle, that catastrophes require a comic element. We appear to feel the same principle in life. We may read solemn descriptions of great events in history,—say of Lord Strafford's trial, and of his marvelous speech, and his appeal to his "saint in heaven"; but we comprehend the whole transaction much better when we learn from Mr. Baillie, the eye-witness, that people ate nuts and apples, and talked, and laughed, and betted on the great question of acquittal and condemnation. Nor is it difficult to understand why this should be so. It seems to be a law of the imagination, at least in most men, that it will not bear concentration. It is essentially a glancing faculty. It goes and comes, and comes and goes, and we hardly know whence or why. But we most of

Digitized by Google

us know that when we try to fix it, in a moment it passes away. Accordingly, the proper procedure of art is to let it go in such a manner as to insure its coming back again. The force of artistic contrasts effects exactly this result: skillfully disposed opposites suggest the notion of each other. We realize more perfectly and easily the great idea, the tragic conception, when we are familiarized with its effects on the minds of little people, with the petty consequences which it causes as well as with the enormous forces from which it comes. The catastrophe of "Samson Agonistes" discloses Milton's imperfect mastery of this element of effect. If ever there was an occasion which admitted its perfect employment, it was this. The kind of catastrophe is exactly that which is sure to strike, and strike forcibly, the minds of common persons. If their observations on the occasion were really given to us, we could scarcely avoid something rather comic. The eccentricity, so to speak, of ordinary persons shows itself peculiarly at such times, and they say the queerest things. Shakespeare has exemplified this principle most skillfully on various occasions: it is the sort of art which is just in his way. His imagination always seems to be floating between the contrasts of things; and if his mind had a resting-place that it liked, it was this ordinary view of extraordinary events. Milton was under the great-[est] obligation to use this relieving principle of art in the catastrophe of "Samson," because he has made every effort to heighten the strictly tragic element, which requires that relief. His art, always serious, was never more serious. His Samson is not the incarnation of physical strength which the popular fancy embodies in the character; nor is it the simple and romantic character of the Old Testament. On the contrary, Samson has become a Puritan: the observations he makes would have done much credit to a religious pikeman in Cromwell's army. In consequence, his death requires some lightening touches to

Digitized by Google

make it a properly artistic event. The pomp of seriousness becomes too oppressive.

"At length for intermission sake they led him
Between the pillars; he his guide requested
(For so from such as nearer stood we heard),
As over-tired, to let him lean awhile
With both his arms on those two massy pillars
That to the archèd roof gave main support.
He unsuspicious led him; which when Samson
Felt in his arms, with head awhile inclined,
And eyes fast fixed, he stood, as one who prayed,
Or some great matter in his mind revolved;
At last with head erect thus cried aloud:
'Hitherto, lords, what your commands imposed
I have performed, as reason was, obeying,
Not without wonder or delight beheld;
Now of my own accord such other trial
I mean to show you of my strength, yet greater,
As with amaze shall strike all who behold.'
This uttered, straining all his nerves he bowed,
As with the force of winds and waters pent
When mountains tremble, those two massy pillars
With horrible convulsion to and fro.
He tugged, he shook, till down they came, and drew
The whole roof after them, with burst of thunder,
Upon the heads of all who sat beneath,—
Lords, ladies, captains, counselors, or priests,
Their choice nobility and flower, not only
Of this, but each Philistian city round,
Met from all parts to solemnize this feast.
Samson with these immixed, inevitably
Pulled down the same destruction on himself;
The vulgar only 'scaped who stood without.
Chor. O dearly bought revenge, yet glorious!
Living or dying thou hast fulfilled
The work for which thou wast foretold
To Israel, and now liest victorious
Among thy slain self-killed,
Not willingly, but tangled in the fold
Of dire necessity, whose law in death conjoined
Thee with thy slaughtered foes, in number more
Than all thy life had slain before."

Digitized by Google

This is grave and fine; but Shakespeare would have done it differently and better.

We need not pause to observe how certainly this deficiency in humor and in the delineation of ordinary human feeling is connected with a recluse, a solitary, and to some extent an unsympathizing life. If we combine a certain natural aloofness from common men with literary habits and an incessantly studious musing, we shall at once see how powerful a force is brought to bear on an instinctively austere character, and how sure it will be to develop the peculiar tendencies of it, both good and evil. It was to no purpose that Milton seems to have practiced a sort of professional study of life. No man could rank more highly the importance to a poet of an intellectual insight into all-important pursuits and "seemly arts." But it is not by the mere intellect that we can take in the daily occupations of mankind: we must sympathize with them, and see them in their human relations. A chimney-sweeper, *quâ* chimney-sweeper, is not very sentimental: it is in himself that he is so interesting.

Milton's austere character is in some sort the more evident because he possessed in large measure a certain relieving element, in which those who are eminent in that character are very deficient. Generally such persons have but obtuse senses: we are prone to attribute the purity of their conduct to the dullness of their sensations. Milton had no such obtuseness: he had every opportunity for knowing the "world of eye and ear"*; you cannot open his works without seeing how much he did know of it. The austerity of his nature was not caused by the deficiency of his senses, but by an excess of the warning instinct. Even when he professed to delineate the world of sensuous delight, this instinct shows itself. Dr. Johnson thought he could discern melancholy in "L'Allegro":† if he had said "solitariness," it would have been correct.

The peculiar nature of Milton's character is very conspicuous in the events of his domestic life, and in

* Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey." † "Life of Milton."

Digitized by Google

the views which he took of the great public revolutions of his age. We can spare only a very brief space for the examination of either of these; but we will endeavor to say a few words upon each of them.

The circumstances of Milton's first marriage are as singular as any in the strange series of the loves of the poets. The scene opens with an affair of business. Milton's father, as is well known, was a scrivener,—a kind of professional money-lender, then well known in London; and having been early connected with the vicinity of Oxford, continued afterwards to have pecuniary transactions of a certain nature with country gentlemen of that neighborhood. In the course of these he advanced £500 to a certain Mr. Richard Powell, a squire of fair landed estate, residing at Forest Hill, which is about four miles from the city of Oxford. The money was lent on the 11th of June, 1627; and a few months afterwards Mr. Milton the elder gave £312 of it to his son the poet, who was then a youth at college, and made a formal memorandum of the same in the form then usual, which still exists. The debt was never wholly discharged; "for in 1650–1 we find Milton asserting on oath that he had received only about £180, 'in part of satisfaction of my said just and principal debt, with damages for the same, and my costs of suit.'" Mr. Keightley supposes him to have taken "many a ride over to Forest Hill" after he left Cambridge and was living at Horton, which is not very far distant; but of course this is only conjecture. We only know that about 1643 "he took," as his nephew relates, "a journey into the country, nobody about him certainly knowing the reason, or that it was any more than a journey of recreation. After a month's stay, home he returns a married man, that went out a bachelor; his wife being Mary, the eldest daughter of Mr. Richard Powell, then a justice of the peace" for the county of Oxford. The suddenness of the event is rather striking; but Philips was at the time one of Milton's pupils, and it

Digitized by Google

is possible that some pains may have been taken to conceal the love affair from the "young gentlemen." Still, as Philips was Milton's nephew, he was likely to hear such intelligence tolerably early; and as he does not seem to have done so, the *dénouement* was probably rather prompt. At any rate, he was certainly married at that time, and took his bride home to his house in Aldersgate Street; and there was feasting and gayety according to the usual custom of such events. A few weeks after, the lady went home to her friends, in which there was of course nothing remarkable; but it is singular that when the natural limit of her visit at home was come, she absolutely refused to return to her husband. The grounds of so strange a resolution are very difficult to ascertain. Political feeling ran very high; old Mr. Powell adhered to the side of the king, and Milton to that of the Parliament: and this might be fancied to have caused an estrangement. But on the other hand, these circumstances must have been well known three months before. Nothing had happened in that quarter of a year to change very materially the position of the two parties in the state. Some other cause for Mrs. Milton's conduct must be looked for. She herself is said to have stated that she did not like her husband's "spare diet and hard study."* No doubt, too, she found it dull in London: she had probably always lived in the country, and must have been quite unaccustomed to the not very pleasant scene in which she found herself. Still, many young ladies have married schoolmasters, and many young ladies have gone from Oxfordshire to London; and nevertheless, no such dissolution of matrimonial harmony is known to have occurred.

The fact we believe to be, that the bride took a dislike to her husband. We cannot but have a suspicion that she did not like him before marriage, and that pecuniary reasons had their influence. If, however, Mr. Powell exerted his paternal influence, it may

* Philips.

Digitized by Google

be admitted that he had unusual considerations to advance in favor of the alliance he proposed. It is not every father whose creditors are handsome young gentlemen with fair incomes. Perhaps it seemed no extreme tyranny to press the young lady a little to do that which some others might have done without pressing. Still, all this is but hypothesis: our evidence as to the love affairs of the time of King Charles I. is but meager. But whatever the feelings of Miss Powell may have been, those of Mrs. Milton are exceedingly certain. She would not return to her husband; she did not answer his letters; and a messenger whom he sent to bring her back was handled rather roughly. Unquestionably she was deeply to blame, by far the most to blame of the two. Whatever may be alleged against him is as nothing compared with her offense in leaving him. To defend so startling a course, we must adopt views of divorce even more extreme than those which Milton was himself driven to inculcate; and whatever Mrs. Milton's practice may have been, it may be fairly conjectured that her principles were strictly orthodox. Yet if she could be examined by a commission to the ghosts, she would probably have some palliating circumstances to allege in mitigation of judgment. There were perhaps peculiarities in Milton's character which a young lady might not improperly dislike. The austere and ascetic character is of course far less agreeable to women than the sensuous and susceptible. The self-occupation, the pride, the abstraction of the former are to the female mind disagreeable; studious habits and unusual self-denial seem to it purposeless; lofty enthusiasm, public spirit, the solitary pursuit of an elevated ideal, are quite out of its way: they rest too little on the visible world to be intelligible, they are too little suggested by the daily occurrences of life to seem possible. The poet in search of an imaginary phantom has never been successful with women,—there are innumerable proofs of that; and the ascetic

Digitized by Google

moralist is even less interesting. A character combined out of the two — and this to some extent was Milton's — is singularly likely to meet with painful failure; with a failure the more painful, that it could never anticipate or explain it. Possibly he was absorbed in an austere self-conscious excellence: it may never have occurred to him that a lady might prefer the trivial detail of daily happiness.

Milton's own view of the matter he has explained to us in his book on divorce; and it is a very odd one. His complaint was that his wife would not talk. What he wished in marriage was "an intimate and speaking help": he encountered "a mute and spiritless mate." One of his principal incitements to the "pious necessity of divorcing" was an unusual deficiency in household conversation. A certain loquacity in their wives has been the complaint of various eminent men; but his domestic affliction was a different one. The "ready and reviving associate," whom he had hoped to find, appeared to be a "coinhabiting mischief," who was sullen, and perhaps seemed bored and tired. And at times he is disposed to cast the blame of his misfortune on the uninstructive nature of youthful virtue. The "soberest and best governed men," he says, "are least practiced in these affairs," are not very well aware that "the bashful muteness" of a young lady "may ofttimes hide all the unliveliness and natural sloth which is really unfit for conversation," and are rather in too great haste to "light the nuptial torch": whereas those "who have lived most loosely, by reason of their bold accustoming, prove most successful in their matches; because their wild affections, unsettling at will, have been as so many divorces to teach them experience." And he rather wishes to infer that the virtuous man should, in case of mischance, have his resource of divorce likewise.

In truth, Milton's book on divorce — though only containing principles which he continued to believe

Digitized by Google

long after he had any personal reasons for wishing to do so — was clearly suggested at first by the unusual phenomena of his first marriage. His wife began by not speaking to him, and finished by running away from him. Accordingly, like most books which spring out of personal circumstances, his treatises on this subject have a frankness and a mastery of detail which others on the same topic sometimes want. He is remarkably free from one peculiarity of modern writers on such matters. Several considerate gentlemen are extremely anxious for the "rights of woman": they think that women will benefit by removing the bulwarks which the misguided experience of ages has erected for their protection. A migratory system of domestic existence might suit Madame Dudevant, and a few cases of singular exception; but we cannot fancy that it would be, after all, so much to the taste of most ladies as the present more permanent system. We have some reminiscence of the stories of the wolf and the lamb, when we hear amiable men addressing a female auditory (in books, of course) on the advantages of a freer "development." We are perhaps wrong, but we cherish an indistinct suspicion that an indefinite extension of the power of selection would rather tend to the advantage of the sex which more usually chooses. But we have no occasion to avow such opinions now. Milton had no such modern views: he is frankly and honestly anxious for the rights of the man. Of the doctrine that divorce is only permitted for the help of wives, he exclaims, "Palpably uxorious! who can be ignorant that woman was created for man, and not man for woman? . . . What an injury is it after wedlock not to be beloved! what to be slighted! what to be contended with in point of house-rule who shall be the head; not for any parity of wisdom, for that were something reasonable, but out of a female pride! 'I suffer not,' saith St. Paul, 'the woman to usurp authority over the man.' If the Apostle could not suffer

Digitized by Google

it," he naturally remarks, "into what mold is he mortified that can?" He had a sincere desire to preserve men from the society of unsocial and unsympathizing women; and that was his principal idea.

His theory, to a certain extent, partakes of the same notion. The following passage contains a perspicuous exposition of it:—

"Moses, Deut. xxiv. 1, established a grave and prudent law, full of moral equity, full of due consideration towards nature, that cannot be resisted, a law consenting with the wisest men and civilest nations: that when a man hath married a wife, if it come to pass that he cannot love her by reason of some displeasing natural quality or unfitness in her, let him write her a bill of divorce. The intent of which law undoubtedly was this: that if any good and peaceable man should discover some helpless disagreement or dislike, either of mind or body, whereby he could not cheerfully perform the duty of a husband without the perpetual dissembling of offense and disturbance to his spirit,—rather than to live uncomfortably and unhappily both to himself and to his wife, rather than to continue undertaking a duty which he could not possibly discharge, he might dismiss her whom he could not tolerably, and so not conscionably, retain. And this law the Spirit of God by the mouth of Solomon, Prov. xxx. 21, 23, testifies to be a good and a necessary law, by granting it that 'a hated woman' (for so the Hebrew word signifies, rather than 'odious,' though it come all to one),—that 'a hated woman, when she is married, is a thing that the earth cannot bear.'"

And he complains that the civil law of modern states interferes with the "domestical prerogative of the husband."

His notion would seem to have been that a husband was bound not to dismiss his wife, except for a reason really sufficient; such as a thoroughly incompatible temper, an incorrigible "muteness," and a desertion like that of Mrs. Milton. But he scarcely liked to admit that in the use of this power he should be subject to the correction of human tribunals. He thought that the circumstances of each case depended upon "utterless facts"; and that it was practically impossible for a civil court to decide

Digitized by Google

on a subject so delicate in its essence, and so imperceptible in its data. But though amiable men doubtless suffer much from the deficiencies of their wives, we should hardly like to intrust them, in their own cases, with a jurisdiction so prompt and summary.

We are far from being concerned, however, just now, with the doctrine of divorce on its intrinsic merits: we were only intending to give such an account of Milton's opinions upon it as might serve to illustrate his character. We think we have shown that it is possible there may have been, in his domestic relations, a little overweening pride; a tendency to overrate the true extent of masculine rights, and to dwell on his wife's duty to be social towards him rather than on his duty to be social towards her,—to be rather sullen whenever she was not quite cheerful. Still, we are not defending a lady for leaving her husband for defects of such inferior magnitude. Few households would be kept together, if the right of transition were exercised on such trifling occasions. We are but suggesting that she may share the excuse which our great satirist has suggested for another unreliable lady: "My mother was an angel; but angels are not always *commodes à vivre.*"

This is not a pleasant part of our subject, and we must leave it. It is more agreeable to relate that on no occasion of his life was the substantial excellence of Milton's character more conclusively shown than in his conduct at the last stage of this curious transaction. After a very considerable interval, and after the publication of his book on divorce, Mrs. Milton showed a disposition to return to her husband; and in spite of his theories, he received her with open arms. With great Christian patience, he received her relations too. The Parliamentary party was then victorious; and old Mr. Powell, who had suffered very much in the cause of the king, lived until his death untroubled, and "wholly to his devotion,"* as we are informed, in the house of his son-in-law.

* Said by Philips, not of Mr. Powell but of Milton's father. — Ed.

Digitized by Google

Of the other occurrences of Milton's domestic life we have left ourselves no room to speak; we must turn to our second source of illustration for his character,—his opinions on the great public events of his time. It may seem odd, but we believe that a man of austere character naturally tends *both* to an excessive party spirit and to an extreme isolation. Of course the circumstances which develop the one must be different from those which are necessary to call out the other: party spirit requires companionship; isolation, if we may be pardoned so original a remark, excludes it. But though, as we have shown, this species of character is prone to mental solitude, tends to an intellectual isolation where it is possible and as soon as it can, yet when invincible circumstances throw it into mental companionship, when it is driven into earnest association with earnest men on interesting topics, its zeal becomes excessive. Such a man's mind is at home only with its own enthusiasm; it is cooped up within the narrow limits of its own ideas, and it can make no allowance for those who differ from or oppose them. We may see something of this excessive party zeal in Burke. No one's reasons are more philosophical; yet no one who acted with a party went farther in aid of it or was more violent in support of it. He forgot what could be said for the tenets of the enemy; his imagination made that enemy an abstract incarnation of his tenets. A man, too, who knows that he formed his opinions originally by a genuine and intellectual process is but little aware of the undue energy those ideas may obtain from the concurrence of those around. Persons who first acquired their ideas at second hand are more open to a knowledge of their own weakness, and better acquainted with the strange force which there is in the sympathy of others. The isolated mind, when it acts with the popular feeling, is apt to exaggerate that feeling for the most part by an almost inevitable consequence of the feelings which render it isolated.

Digitized by Google

Milton is an example of this remark. In the commencement of the struggle between Charles I. and the Parliament, he sympathized strongly with the popular movement, and carried to what seems now a strange extreme his partisanship. No one could imagine that the first literary Englishman of his time could write the following passage on Charles I.:—

"Who can with patience hear this filthy, rascally fool speak so irreverently of persons eminent both in greatness and piety? Dare you compare King *David* with King *Charles:* a most religious king and prophet with a superstitious prince, and who was but a novice in the Christian religion; a most prudent, wise prince with a weak one; a valiant prince with a cowardly one; finally, a most just prince with a most unjust one? Have you the impudence to commend his chastity and sobriety, who is known to have committed all manner of lewdness in company with his confidant the Duke of *Buckingham?* It were to no purpose to inquire into the private actions of his life, who publicly at plays would embrace and kiss the ladies."*

Whatever may be the faults of that ill-fated monarch,—and they assuredly were not small,—no one would now think this absurd invective to be even an excusable exaggeration. It misses the true mark altogether, and is the expression of a strongly imaginative mind, which has seen something that it did not like, and is unable in consequence to see anything that has any relation to it distinctly or correctly. But with the supremacy of the Long Parliament Milton's attachment to their cause ceased. No one has drawn a more unfavorable picture of the rule which they established. Years after their supremacy had passed away, and the restoration of the monarchy had covered with a new and strange scene the old actors and the old world, he thrust into a most unlikely part of his "History of England" [Book iii.] the following attack on them:—

"But when once the superficial zeal and popular fumes that acted their New Magistracy were cooled and spent in them, straight

* "Defense of the People of England," Chap. iv.

Digitized by Google

every one betook himself (setting the Commonwealth behind, his private ends before) to do as his own profit or ambition led him. Then was justice delayed, and soon after denied; spite and favor determined all: hence faction, thence treachery, both at home and in the field; everywhere wrong and oppression; foul and horrid deeds committed daily, or maintained, in secret or in open. Some who had been called from shops and warehouses, without other merit, to sit in supreme councils and committees (as their breeding was), fell to huckster the Commonwealth. Others did thereafter as men could soothe and humor them best; so he who would give most, or under covert of hypocritical zeal insinuate basest, enjoyed unworthily the rewards of learning and fidelity, or escaped the punishment of his crimes and misdeeds. Their votes and ordinances, which men looked should have contained the repealing of bad laws, and the immediate constitution of better, resounded with nothing else but new impositions, taxes, excises, — yearly, monthly, weekly; not to reckon the offices, gifts, and preferments bestowed and shared among themselves."

His dislike of this system of committees, and of the generally dull and unemphatic administration of the Commonwealth, attached him to the Puritan army and to Cromwell; but in the continuation of the passage we have referred to, he expresses — with something, let it be said, of a schoolmaster feeling — an unfavorable judgment on their career: —

"For *Britain*, to speak a truth not often spoken, as it is a land fruitful enough of men stout and courageous in war, so it is naturally not over-fertile of men able to govern justly and prudently in peace, trusting only in their mother-wit; who consider not justly that civility, prudence, love of the public good more than of money or vain honor, are to this soil in a manner outlandish, — grow not here, but in minds well implanted with solid and elaborate breeding; too impolitic else and rude, if not headstrong and intractable to the industry and virtue either of executing or understanding true civil government. Valiant indeed, and prosperous to win a field; but to know the end and reason of winning, unjudicious and unwise: in good or bad success, alike unteachable. For the sun, which we want, ripens wits as well as fruits; and as wine and oil are imported to us from abroad, so must ripe understanding and many civil virtues be imported into our minds from foreign writings and examples of best ages; we shall else miscarry still, and come short in the attempts of any great enterprise. Hence did their victories

Digitized by Google

prove as fruitless as their losses dangerous, and left them still, conquering, under the same grievances that men suffer conquered: which was indeed unlikely to go otherwise, unless men more than vulgar — bred up, as few of them were, in the knowledge of ancient and illustrious deeds, invincible against many and vain titles, impartial to friendships and relations — had conducted their affairs; but then, from the chapman to the retailer, many whose ignorance was more audacious than the rest were admitted with all their sordid rudiments to bear no mean sway among them, both in church and state."

We need not speak of Milton's disapprobation of the Restoration. Between him and the world of Charles II. the opposition was inevitable and infinite. Therefore the general fact remains, that except in the early struggles, when he exaggerated the popular feeling, he remained solitary in opinion, and had very little sympathy with any of the prevailing parties of his time.

Milton's own theory of government is to be learned from his works. He advocated a free commonwealth, without rule of a single person or House of Lords; but the form of his projected commonwealth was peculiar. He thought that a certain perpetual council, which should be elected by the nation once for all, and the number of which should be filled up as vacancies might occur, was the best possible machine of government. He did not confine his advocacy to abstract theory, but proposed the immediate establishment of such a council in this country. We need not go into an elaborate discussion to show the errors of this conclusion. Hardly any one, then or since, has probably adopted it. The interest of the theoretical parts of Milton's political works is entirely historical. The tenets advocated are not of great value, and the arguments by which he supports them are perhaps of less; but their relation to the times in which they were written gives them a very singular interest. The time of the Commonwealth was the only period in English history in which the fundamental questions of government have been thrown open for popular discussion in this country. We read in French

Digitized by Google

literature, discussions on the advisability of establishing a monarchy, on the advisability of establishing a republic, on the advisability of establishing an empire; and before we proceed to examine the arguments, we cannot help being struck at the strange contrast which this multiplicity of open questions presents to our own uninquiring acquiescence in the hereditary polity which has descended to us. "King, Lords, and Commons" are, we think, ordinances of nature. Yet Milton's political writings embody the reflections of a period when, for a few years, the government of England was nearly as much a subject of fundamental discussion as that of France was in 1851. An "invitation to thinkers," to borrow the phrase of Necker, was given by the circumstances of the time; and with the habitual facility of philosophical speculation, it was accepted, and used to the utmost.

Such are not the kind of speculations in which we expect assistance from Milton. It is not in its transactions with others, in its dealings with the manifold world, that the isolated and austere mind shows itself to the most advantage. Its strength lies in itself. It has "a calm and pleasing solitariness." It hears thoughts which others cannot hear. It enjoys the quiet and still air of delightful studies; and is ever conscious of such musing and poetry "as is not to be obtained by the invocation of Dame Memory and her twin daughters, but by devout prayer to that Eternal Spirit, who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge, and sends out his seraphim with the hallowed fire of his altar."

> "Descend from heaven, Urania, by that name
> If rightly thou art called, whose voice divine
> Following, above th' Olympian hill I soar,
> Above the flight of Pegaséan wing.
> The meaning, not the name, I call; for thou
> Nor of the Muses nine, nor on the top
> Of old Olympus dwell'st, but heavenly born:
> Before the hills appeared, or fountain flowed,
> Thou with eternal Wisdom didst converse,

Digitized by Google

Wisdom thy sister, and with her didst play
In presence of th' Almighty Father, pleased
With thy celestial song. Up led by thee,
Into the heaven of heavens I have presumed,
An earthly guest, and drawn empyreal air,
Thy tempering. With like safety guided down,
Return me to my native element;
Lest from this flying steed unreined (as once
Bellerophon, though from a lower clime),
Dismounted, on th' Aleian field I fall,
Erroneous there to wander, and forlorn.
Half yet remains unsung, but narrower bound
Within the visible diurnal sphere:
Standing on earth, not rapt above the pole,
More safe I sing with mortal voice, unchanged
To hoarse or mute, though fallen on evil days,
On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues;
In darkness, and with dangers compassed round,
And solitude: yet not alone, while thou
Visit'st my slumbers nightly, or when morn
Purples the east. Still govern thou my song,
Urania, and fit audience find, though few;
But drive far off the barbarous dissonance
Of Bacchus and his revelers, the race
Of that wild rout that tore the Thracian bard
In Rhodope, where woods and rocks had ears
To rapture, till the savage clamor drowned
Both harp and voice, nor could the Muse defend
Her son. So fail not thou, who thee implores;
For thou art heavenly, she an empty dream."*

"An ancient clergyman of Dorsetshire, Dr. Wright, found John Milton in a small chamber hung with rusty green, sitting in an elbow-chair, and dressed neatly in black; pale, but not cadaverous. . . . He used also to sit in a gray coarse-cloth coat at the door of his house near Bunhill Fields, in warm sunny weather;"† and the common people said he was inspired.

If from the man we turn to his works, we are struck at once with two singular contrasts. The first

* "Paradise Lost," Book vii. † Richardson.

Digitized by Google

of them is this: — The distinction between ancient and modern art is sometimes said, and perhaps truly, to consist in the simple bareness of the imaginative conceptions which we find in ancient art, and the comparatively complex clothing in which all modern creations are embodied. If we adopt this distinction, Milton seems in some sort ancient, and in some sort modern. Nothing is so simple as the subject-matter of his works. The two greatest of his creations, the character of Satan and the character of Eve, are two of the simplest — the latter probably the very simplest — in the whole field of literature. On this side Milton's art is classical. On the other hand, in no writer is the imagery more profuse, the illustrations more various, the dress altogether more splendid; and in this respect the style of his art seems romantic and modern. In real truth, however, it is only ancient art in a modern disguise: the dress is a mere dress, and can be stripped off when we will, — we all of us do perhaps in memory strip it off for ourselves. Notwithstanding the lavish adornments with which her image is presented, the character of Eve is still the simplest sort of feminine essence, — the pure embodiment of that inner nature which we believe and hope that women have. The character of Satan, though it is not so easily described, has nearly as few elements in it. The most purely modern conceptions will not bear to be unclothed in this manner: their romantic garment clings inseparably to them. Hamlet and Lear are not to be thought of except as complex characters, with very involved and complicated embodiments. They are as difficult to draw out in words as the common characters of life are; that of Hamlet, perhaps, is more so. If we make it, as perhaps we should, the characteristic of modern and romantic art that it presents us with creations which we cannot think of or delineate except as very varied, and so to say circumstantial, we must not rank Milton among the masters of romantic art. And without involving

Digitized by Google

the subject in the troubled sea of an old controversy, we may say that the most striking of the poetical peculiarities of Milton is the bare simplicity of his ideas and the rich abundance of his illustrations.

Another of his peculiarities is equally striking. There seems to be such a thing as second-hand poetry: some poets, musing on the poetry of other men, have unconsciously shaped it into something of their own. The new conception is like the original, it would never probably have existed had not the original existed previously: still, it is sufficiently different from the original to be a new thing, not a copy or a plagiarism; it is a creation, though, so to say, a suggested creation. Gray is as good an example as can be found of a poet whose works abound in this species of semi-original conceptions. Industrious critics track his best lines back, and find others like them which doubtless lingered near his fancy while he was writing them. The same critics have been equally busy with the works of Milton, and equally successful. They find traces of his reading in half his works; not, which any reader could do, in overt similes and distinct illustrations, but also in the very texture of the thought and the expression. In many cases, doubtless, they discover more than he himself knew. A mind like his, which has an immense store of imaginative recollections, can never know which of his own imaginations is exactly suggested by which recollection. Men awake with their best ideas; it is seldom worth while to investigate very curiously whence they came. Our proper business is to adapt and mold and act upon them. Of poets perhaps this is true even more remarkably than of other men: their ideas are suggested in modes, and according to laws, which are even more impossible to specify than the ideas of the rest of the world. Second-hand poetry, so to say, often seems quite original to the poet himself; he frequently does not know that he derived it from an old memory: years afterwards it may strike him

Digitized by Google

as it does others. Still, in general, such inferior species of creation is not so likely to be found in minds of singular originality as in those of less. A brooding, placid, cultivated mind, like that of Gray, is the place where we should expect to meet with it. Great originality disturbs the adaptive process, removes the mind of the poet from the thoughts of other men, and occupies it with its own heated and flashing thoughts. Poetry of the second degree is like the secondary rocks of modern geology,—a still, gentle, alluvial formation; the igneous glow of primary genius brings forth ideas like the primeval granite, simple, astounding, and alone. Milton's case is an exception to this rule. His mind has marked originality, probably as much of it as any in literature; but it has as much of molded recollection as any mind too. His poetry in consequence is like an artificial park, green and soft and beautiful, yet with outlines bold, distinct, and firm, and the eternal rock ever jutting out; or better still, it is like our own lake scenery, where nature has herself the same combination, where we have Rydal Water side by side with the everlasting upheaved mountain. Milton has the same union of softened beauty with unimpaired grandeur; and it is his peculiarity.

These are the two contrasts which puzzle us at first in Milton, and which distinguish him from other poets in our remembrance afterwards. We have a superficial complexity in illustration and imagery and metaphor; and in contrast with it we observe a latent simplicity of idea, an almost rude strength of conception. The underlying thoughts are few, though the flowers on the surface are so many. We have likewise the perpetual contrast of the soft poetry of the memory, and the firm—as it were, fused—and glowing poetry of the imagination. His words, we may half fancifully say, are like his character: there is the same austerity in the real essence, the same exquisiteness of sense, the same delicacy of form which

Digitized by Google

we know that he had, the same music which we imagine there was in his voice. In both his character and his poetry there was an ascetic nature in a sheath of beauty.

No book, perhaps, which has ever been written is more difficult to criticize than "Paradise Lost." The only way to criticize a work of the imagination is, to describe its effect upon the mind of the reader,— at any rate, of the critic; and this can only be adequately delineated by strong illustrations, apt similes, and perhaps a little exaggeration. The task is in its very nature not an easy one: the poet paints a picture on the fancy of the critic, and the critic has in some sort to copy it on the paper; he must say what it is before he can make remarks upon it. But in the case of "Paradise Lost" we hardly like to use illustrations. The subject is one which the imagination rather shrinks from. At any rate, it requires courage and an effort to compel the mind to view such a subject as distinctly and vividly as it views other subjects. Another peculiarity of "Paradise Lost" makes the difficulty even greater. It does not profess to be a mere work of art; or rather, it claims to be by no means that and that only. It starts with a dogmatic aim: it avowedly intends to

> "assert eternal Providence,
> And justify the ways of God to men."

In this point of view we have always had a sympathy with the Cambridge mathematician who has been so much abused. He said, "After all, 'Paradise Lost' *proves* nothing"; and various persons of poetical tastes and temperament have been very severe on the prosaic observation. Yet, "after all," he was right: Milton professed to prove something; he was too profound a critic — rather, he had too profound an instinct of those eternal principles of art which criticism tries to state — not to know that on such a subject he must prove something. He professed to deal with the great

Digitized by Google

problem of human destiny: to show why man was created, in what kind of universe he lives, whence he came and whither he goes. He dealt of necessity with the greatest of subjects; he had to sketch the greatest of objects. He was concerned with infinity and eternity even more than with time and sense: he undertook to delineate the ways and consequently the character of Providence, as well as the conduct and the tendencies of man. The essence of success in such an attempt is to satisfy the religious sense of man; to bring home to our hearts what we know to be true; to teach us what we have not seen; to awaken us to what we have forgotten; to remove the "covering" from all people, and the "veil" that is spread over all nations: to give us, in a word, such a conception of things divine and human as we can accept, believe, and trust. The true doctrine of criticism demands what Milton invites, — an examination of the degree in which the great epic attains this aim. And if, in examining it, we find it necessary to use unusual illustrations, and plainer words than are customary, it must be our excuse that we do not think the subject can be made clear without them.

The defect of "Paradise Lost" is that, after all, it is founded on a *political* transaction. The scene is in heaven very early in the history of the universe, before the creation of man or the fall of Satan. We have a description of a court [Book v.]. The angels,

"by imperial summons called,"

appear:—

"Under their hierarchs in orders bright
Ten thousand thousand ensigns high advanced;
Standards and gonfalons 'twixt van and rear
Stream in the air, and for distinction serve
Of hierarchies, of orders, and degrees."

To this assemblage "th' Omnipotent" speaks:—

"Hear, all ye angels, progeny of light,
Thrones, dominations, princedoms, virtues, powers,

Digitized by Google

Hear my decree, which unrevoked shall stand:
This day I have begot whom I declare
My only Son, and on this holy hill
Him have anointed, whom ye now behold
At my right hand; your Head I him appoint:
And by myself have sworn, to him shall bow
All knees in heaven, and shall confess him Lord;
Under his great vicegerent reign abide
United as one individual soul,
Forever happy. Him who disobeys,
Me disobeys, breaks union, and that day,
Cast out from God and blessed vision, falls
Int' utter darkness, deep ingulfed, his place
Ordained without redemption, without end."

This act of patronage was not popular at court; and why should it have been? The religious sense is against it. The worship which sinful men owe to God is not transferable to lieutenants and vicegerents. The whole scene of the court jars upon a true feeling; we seem to be reading about some emperor of history, who admits his son to a share in the empire, who confers on him a considerable jurisdiction, and requires officials, with "standards and gonfalons," to bow before him. The orthodoxy of Milton is quite as questionable as his accuracy; the old Athanasian creed was not made by persons who would allow such a picture as that of Milton to stand before their imaginations. The generation of the Son was to them a fact "before all time," an eternal fact. There was no question in their minds of patronage or promotion: the Son was the Son before all time, just as the Father was the Father before all time. Milton had in such matters a bold but not very sensitive imagination. He accepted the inevitable materialism of Biblical (and to some extent of all religious) language as distinct revelation. He certainly believed, in contradiction to the old creed, that God had both "parts and passions." He imagined that earth is

"but the shadow of heaven, and things therein
Each to other like more than on earth is thought."*

* Book v., Raphael to Adam.

Digitized by Google

From some passages it would seem that he actually thought of God as having "the members and form" of a man. Naturally, therefore, he would have no toleration for the mysterious notions of time and eternity which are involved in the traditional doctrine. We are not, however, now concerned with Milton's belief, but with his representation of his creed, —his picture, so to say, of it in "Paradise Lost"; still, as we cannot but think, that picture is almost irreligious, and certainly different from that which has been generally accepted in Christendom. Such phrases as "before all time," "eternal generation," are doubtless very vaguely interpreted by the mass of men; nevertheless, no sensitively orthodox man *could* have drawn the picture of a generation, not to say an exaltation, *in* time.

We shall see this more clearly by reading what follows in the poem.

"All seemed well pleased; all seemed, but were not all."

One of the archangels, whose name can be guessed, decidedly disapproved, and calls a meeting, at which he explains that

"orders and degrees
Jar not with liberty, but well consist;"

but still, that the promotion of a new person, on grounds of relationship merely, above—even infinitely above—the old angels, with imperial titles, was a "new law," and rather tyrannical. Abdiel,

"than whom none with more zeal adored
The Deity, and divine commands obeyed,"

attempts a defense:—

"Grant it thee unjust,
That equal over equals monarch reign:
Thyself, though great and glorious, dost thou count,
Or all angelic nature joined in one,
Equal to him begotten Son? by whom
As by his word the mighty Father made

Digitized by Google

All things, even thee, and all the spirits of heaven
By him created in their bright degrees,
Crowned them with glory, and to their glory named
Thrones, dominations, princedoms, virtues, powers,
Essential Powers; nor by his reign obscured,
But more illustrious made, since he the Head
One of our number thus reduced becomes,
His laws our laws, all honor to him done
Returns our own. Cease then this impious rage,
And tempt not these; but hasten to appease
Th' incensèd Father and th' incensèd Son,
While pardon may be found, in time besought."

Yet though Abdiel's intentions were undeniably good, his argument is rather specious. Acting as an instrument in the process of creation would scarcely give a valid claim to the obedience of the created being. Power may be shown in the act, no doubt; but mere power gives no true claim to the obedience of moral beings. It is a kind of principle of all manner of idolatries and false religions to believe that it does so. Satan, besides, takes issue on the fact:—

"That we were formed then, say'st thou? and the work
Of secondary hands, by task transferred
From Father to his Son? Strange point and new!
Doctrine which we would know whence learned."

And we must say that the speech in which the new ruler is introduced to the "Thrones, dominations, princedoms, virtues, powers," is hard to reconcile with Abdiel's exposition. "*This day*" he seems to have come into existence, and could hardly have assisted at the creation of the angels, who are not young, and who converse with one another like old acquaintances.

We have gone into this part of the subject at length, because it is the source of the great error which pervades "Paradise Lost": Satan is made *interesting*. This has been the charge of a thousand orthodox and even heterodox writers against Milton. Shelley, on the other hand, has gloried in it; and

Digitized by Google

fancied, if we remember rightly, that Milton intentionally ranged himself on the Satanic side of the universe, just as Shelley himself would have done, and that he wished to show the falsity of the ordinary theology. But Milton was born an age too early for such aims, and was far too sincere to have advocated any doctrine in a form so indirect. He believed every word he said. He was not conscious of the effect his teaching would produce in an age like this, when skepticism is in the air, and when it is not possible to help looking coolly on his delineations. Probably in our boyhood we can recollect a period when any solemn description of celestial events would have commanded our respect; we should not have dared to read it intelligently, to canvass its details and see what it meant: it was a religious book; it sounded reverential, and that would have sufficed. Something like this was the state of mind of the seventeenth century. Even Milton probably shared in a vague reverence for religious language; he hardly felt the moral effect of the pictures he was drawing. His artistic instinct, too, often hurries him away. His Satan was to him, as to us, the hero of his poem: having commenced by making him resist on an occasion which in an earthly kingdom would have been excusable and proper, he probably a little sympathized with him, just as his readers do.

The interest of Satan's character is at its height in the first two books. Coleridge justly compared it to that of Napoleon. There is the same pride, the same Satanic ability, the same will, the same egotism. His character seems to grow with his position. He is far finer after his fall, in misery and suffering, with scarcely any resource except in himself, than he was originally in heaven; at least, if Raphael's description of him can be trusted. No portrait which imagination or history has drawn of a revolutionary anarch is nearly so perfect; there is all the grandeur of the greatest human mind, and a certain infinitude

Digitized by Google

in his circumstances which humanity must ever want. Few Englishmen feel a profound reverence for Napoleon I.; there was no French alliance in *his* time; we have most of us some tradition of antipathy to him. Yet hardly any Englishman can read the account of the campaign of 1814 without feeling his interest in the Emperor to be strong, and without perhaps being conscious of a latent wish that he may succeed. Our opinion is against him, our serious wish is of course for England; but the imagination has a sympathy of its own, and will not give place. We read about the great general, — never greater than in that last emergency, — showing resources of genius that seem almost infinite, and that assuredly have never been surpassed, yet vanquished, yielding to the power of circumstances, to the combined force of adversaries each of whom singly he outmatches in strength, and all of whom together he surpasses in majesty and in mind. Something of the same sort of interest belongs to the Satan of the first two books of "Paradise Lost." We know that he will be vanquished; his name is not a recommendation. Still, we do not imagine distinctly the minds by which he is to be vanquished; we do not take the same interest in them that we do in him; our sympathies, our fancy, are on his side.

Perhaps much of this was inevitable; yet what a defect it is! especially what a defect in Milton's own view, and looked at with the stern realism with which he regarded it! Suppose that the author of evil in the universe were the most attractive being in it; suppose that the source of all sin were the origin of all interest to us! We need not dwell upon this.

As we have said, much of this was difficult to avoid, if indeed it could be avoided in dealing with such a theme. Even Milton shrank, in some measure, from delineating the Divine character. His imagination evidently halts when it is required to perform

Digitized by Google

that task. The more delicate imagination of our modern world would shrink still more. Any person who will consider what such an attempt must end in, will find his nerves quiver. But by a curiously fatal error, Milton has selected for delineation exactly that part of the Divine nature which is most beyond the reach of the human faculties, and which is also, when we try to describe our fancy of it, the least effective to our minds. He has made God *argue*. Now, the procedure of the Divine mind from truth to truth must ever be incomprehensible to us; the notion, indeed, of his proceeding at all is a contradiction: to some extent, at least, it is inevitable that we should use such language, but we know it is in reality inapplicable. A long train of reasoning in such a connection is so out of place as to be painful; and yet Milton has many. He relates a series of family prayers in heaven, with sermons afterwards, which are very tedious. Even Pope was shocked at the notion of Providence talking like "a school-divine."* And there is the still worse error, that if you once attribute reasoning to him, subsequent logicians may discover that he does not reason very well.

Another way in which Milton has contrived to strengthen our interest in Satan is the number and insipidity of the good angels. There are old rules as to the necessity of a supernatural machinery for an epic poem, worth some fraction of the paper on which they are written, and derived from the practice of Homer, who believed his gods and goddesses to be real beings, and would have been rather harsh with a critic who called them machinery. These rules had probably an influence with Milton, and induced him to manipulate these serious angels more than he would have done otherwise. They appear to be excellent administrators with very little to do; a kind of grand chamberlains with wings, who fly down to earth and communicate information to Adam and Eve. They have no character: they are essentially

* Imitation of Horace's Epistle to Augustus, Book ii., Ep. i.

Digitized by Google

messengers,—merely conductors, so to say, of the Providential will; no one fancies that they have an independent power of action; they seem scarcely to have minds of their own. No effect can be more unfortunate. If the struggle of Satan had been with Deity directly, the natural instincts of religion would have been awakened; but when an angel possessed of mind is contrasted with angels possessed only of wings, we sympathize with the former.

In the first two books, therefore, our sympathy with Milton's Satan is great; we had almost said unqualified. The speeches he delivers are of well-known excellence. Lord Brougham, no contemptible judge of emphatic oratory, has laid down that if a person had not an opportunity of access to the great Attic masterpieces, he had better choose these for a model. What is to be regretted about the orator is, that he scarcely acts up to his sentiments. "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven" is at any rate an audacious declaration; but he has no room for exhibiting similar audacity in action. His offensive career is limited; in the nature of the subject, there was scarcely any opportunity for the fallen archangel to display in the detail of his operations the surpassing intellect with which Milton has endowed him. He goes across chaos, gets into a few physical difficulties; but these are not much. His grand aim is the conquest of our first parents; and we are at once struck with the enormous inequality of the conflict. Two beings just created, without experience, without guile, without knowledge of good and evil, are expected to contend with a being on the delineation of whose powers every resource of art and imagination, every subtle suggestion, every emphatic simile has been lavished. The idea in every reader's mind is, and must be, not surprise that our first parents should yield, but wonder that Satan should not think it beneath him to attack them. It is as if an army should invest a cottage.

Digitized by Google

We have spoken more of theology than we intended; and we need not say how much the monstrous inequalities attributed to the combatants affect our estimate of the results of the conflict. The state of man is what it is, because the defenseless Adam and Eve of Milton's imagination yielded to the nearly all-powerful Satan whom he has delineated. Milton has in some sense invented this difficulty; for in the book of Genesis there is no such inequality. The serpent may be subtler than any beast of the field; but he is not necessarily subtler or cleverer than man. So far from Milton having justified the ways of God to man, he has loaded the common theology with a new incumbrance.

We may need refreshment after this discussion; and we cannot find it better than in reading a few remarks of Eve:—

"That day I oft remember, when from sleep
I first awaked, and found myself reposed
Under a shade on flowers, much wondering where
And what I was, whence thither brought, and how.
Not distant far from thence a murmuring sound
Of waters issued from a cave, and spread
Into a liquid plain, then stood unmoved
Pure as th' expanse of heaven; I thither went
With unexperienced thought, and laid me down
On the green bank, to look into the clear
Smooth lake, that to me seemed another sky.
As I bent down to look, just opposite
A shape within the watery gleam appeared,
Bending to look on me. I started back,
It started back: but pleased I soon returned;
Pleased it returned, as soon with answering looks
Of sympathy and love. There I had fixed
Mine eyes till now, and pined with vain desire,
Had not a voice thus warned me:—'What thou seest,
What there thou seest, fair creature, is thyself;
With thee it came and goes: but follow me,
And I will bring thee where no shadow stays
Thy coming, and thy soft embraces; he
Whose image thou art, him thou shalt enjoy

Digitized by Google

> Inseparably thine; to him shalt bear
> Multitudes like thyself, and thence be called
> Mother of human race.' What could I do
> But follow straight, invisibly thus led?
> Till I espied thee, fair indeed and tall,
> Under a platan; yet methought less fair,
> Less winning soft, less amiably mild,
> Than that smooth watery image. Back I turned;
> Thou following criedst aloud, 'Return, fair Eve:
> Whom fly'st thou?'"*

Eve's character, indeed, is one of the most wonderful efforts of the human imagination. She is a kind of abstract woman; essentially a typical being; an official "mother of all living." Yet she is a real interesting woman, not only full of delicacy and sweetness, but with all the undefinable fascination, the charm of personality, which such typical characters hardly ever have. By what consummate miracle of wit this charm of individuality is preserved, without impairing the general idea which is ever present to us, we cannot explain, for we do not know.

Adam is far less successful. He has good hair,—"hyacinthine locks" that "from his parted forelock manly hung"; a "fair large front" and "eye sublime": but he has little else that we care for. There is, in truth, no opportunity of displaying manly virtues, even if he possessed them. He has only to yield to his wife's solicitations, which he does. Nor are we sure that he does it well: he is very tedious. He indulges in sermons which are good; but most men cannot but fear that so delightful a being as Eve must have found him tiresome. She steps away, however, and goes to sleep at some of the worst points.

Dr. Johnson remarked that after all, "Paradise Lost" was one of the books which no one wished longer: we fear, in this irreverent generation, some wish it shorter. Hardly any reader would be sorry if some portions of the latter books had been spared

* Book iv.

Digitized by Google

him. Coleridge, indeed, discovered profound mysteries in the last; but in what could not Coleridge find a mystery if he wished? Dryden more wisely remarked that Milton became tedious when he entered upon a "track of Scripture."* Nor is it surprising that such is the case. The style of many parts of Scripture is such that it will not bear addition or subtraction. A word less or an idea more, and the effect upon the mind is the same no longer. Nothing can be more tiresome than a sermonic amplification of such passages. It is almost too much when, as from the pulpit, a paraphrastic commentary is prepared for our spiritual improvement. In deference to the intention, we bear it, but we bear it unwillingly; and we cannot endure it at all when, as in poems, the object is to awaken our fancy rather than to improve our conduct. The account of the creation in the book of Genesis is one of the compositions from which no sensitive imagination would subtract an iota, to which it could not bear to add a word. Milton's paraphrase is alike copious and ineffective. The universe is, in railway phrase, "opened," but not created; no green earth springs in a moment from the indefinite void. Instead, too, of the simple loneliness of the Old Testament, several angelic officials are in attendance, who help in nothing, but indicate that heaven must be plentifully supplied with tame creatures.

There is no difficulty in writing such criticisms, and indeed other unfavorable criticisms, on "Paradise Lost." There is scarcely any book in the world which is open to a greater number, or which a reader who allows plain words to produce a due effect will be less satisfied with. Yet what book is really greater? In the best parts the words have a magic in them; even in the inferior passages you are hardly sensible of their inferiority till you translate them into your own language. Perhaps no style ever written by man expressed so adequately the conceptions of a mind so strong and so peculiar; a manly strength, a

* "Essay on Satire."

Digitized by Google

haunting atmosphere of enhancing suggestions, a firm continuous music, are only some of its excellences. To comprehend the whole of the others, you must take the volume down and read it,—the best defense of Milton, as has been said most truly, against all objections.

Probably no book shows the transition which our theology has made since the middle of the seventeenth century, at once so plainly and so fully. We do not now compose long narratives to "justify the ways of God to men." The more orthodox we are, the more we shrink from it, the more we hesitate at such a task, the more we allege that we have no powers for it. Our most celebrated defenses of established tenets are in the style of Butler, not in that of Milton. They do not profess to show a satisfactory explanation of human destiny: on the contrary, they hint that probably we could not understand such an explanation if it were given us; at any rate, they allow that it is not given us. Their course is palliative: they suggest an "analogy of difficulties"; if our minds were greater, so they reason, we should comprehend these doctrines,—now we cannot explain analogous facts which we see and know. No style can be more opposite to the bold argument, the boastful exposition of Milton. The teaching of the eighteenth century is in the very atmosphere we breathe: we read it in the teachings of Oxford; we hear it from the missionaries of the Vatican. The air of the theology is clarified. We know our difficulties, at least: we are rather prone to exaggerate the weight of some than to deny the reality of any.

We cannot continue a line of thought which would draw us on too far for the patience of our readers. We must, however, make one more remark, and we shall have finished our criticism on "Paradise Lost." It is analogous to that which we have just made. The scheme of the poem is based on an offense against positive morality. The offense of Adam was

Digitized by Google

not against nature or conscience, nor against anything of which we can see the reason or conceive the obligation, but against an unexplained injunction of the Supreme Will. The rebellion in heaven, as Milton describes it, was a rebellion not against known ethics or immutable spiritual laws, but against an arbitrary selection and an unexplained edict. We do not say that there is no such thing as positive morality, — we do not think so; even if we did, we should not insert a proposition so startling at the conclusion of a literary criticism. But we are sure that wherever a positive moral edict is promulgated, it is no subject, except perhaps under a very peculiar treatment, for literary art. By the very nature of it, it cannot satisfy the heart and conscience. It is a difficulty; we need not attempt to explain it away, — there are mysteries enough which will never be explained away. But it is contrary to every principle of criticism to state the difficulty as if it were not one; to bring forward the puzzle, yet leave it to itself; to publish so strange a problem, and give only an untrue solution of it: and yet such, in its bare statement, is all that Milton has done.

Of Milton's other writings we have left ourselves no room to speak; and though every one of them, or almost every one of them, would well repay a careful criticism, yet few of them seem to throw much additional light on his character, or add much to our essential notion of his genius, though they may exemplify and enhance it. "Comus" is the poem which does so the most. Literature has become so much lighter than it used to be, that we can scarcely realize the position it occupied in the light literature of our forefathers. We have now in our own language many poems that are pleasanter in their subject, more graceful in their execution, more flowing in their outline, more easy to read. Dr. Johnson, though perhaps no very excellent authority on the more intangible graces of literature, was disposed to deny to

Digitized by Google

Milton the capacity of creating the lighter literature: "Milton, madam, was a genius that could cut a colossus from a rock, but could not carve heads upon cherry-stones." And it would not be surprising if this generation, which has access to the almost infinite quantity of lighter compositions which have been produced since Johnson's time, were to echo his sentence. In some degree, perhaps, the popular taste does so. "Comus" has no longer the peculiar exceptional popularity which it used to have: we can talk without general odium of its defects; its characters are nothing, its sentiments are tedious, its story is not interesting. But it is only when we have realized the magnitude of its deficiencies that we comprehend the peculiarity of its greatness. Its power is in its style. A grave and firm music pervades it; it is soft, without a thought of weakness; harmonious and yet strong; impressive as few such poems are, yet covered with a bloom of beauty and a complexity of charm that few poems have either. We have perhaps light literature in itself better, that we read oftener and more easily, that lingers more in our memories; but we have not any, we question if there ever will be any, which gives so true a conception of the capacity and the dignity of the mind by which it was produced. The breath of solemnity which hovers round the music attaches us to the writer. Every line, here as elsewhere, in Milton excites the idea of indefinite power.

And so we must draw to a close. The subject is an infinite one, and if we pursued it, we should lose ourselves in miscellaneous commentary, and run on far beyond the patience of our readers. What we have said has at least a defined intention: we have wished to state the impression which the character of Milton and the greatest of Milton's works are likely to produce on readers of the present generation, — a generation different from his own almost more than any other.

Digitized by Google

*LADY MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU.**

(1862.)

[All the uncredited quotations in this essay are from Lady Louisa Stuart's "Anecdotes" or the other introductory matter in the edition reviewed.—Ed.]

NOTHING is so transitory as second-class fame. The name of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu is hardly now known to the great mass of ordinary English readers: a generation has arisen which has had time to forget her. Yet only a few years since, an allusion to the "Lady Mary" would have been easily understood by every well-informed person; young ladies were enjoined to form their style upon hers; and no one could have anticipated that her letters would seem in 1862 as different from what a lady of rank would then write or publish as if they had been written in the times of paganism. The very change, however, of popular taste and popular morality gives these letters now a kind of interest. The farther and the more rapidly we have drifted from where we once lay, the more do we wish to learn what kind of port it was. We venture, therefore, to recommend the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu as an instructive and profitable study,—not indeed to the youngest of young ladies, but to those maturer persons of either sex who "have taken all knowledge to be their province,"† and who have commenced their readings in "universality" by an assiduous perusal of Parisian fiction.

---

*The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Edited by her Great-grandson, Lord Wharncliffe. Third Edition, with Additions and Corrections derived from the Original Manuscripts, Illustrative Notes, and a New Memoir. By W. Moy Thomas. In two volumes. London: Henry Bohn.

†Bacon, letter to Lord Burleigh.

Digitized by Google

It is, we admit, true that these letters are not at the present day very agreeable reading. What our grandfathers and grandmothers thought of them it is not so easy to say. But it now seems clear that Lady Mary was that most miserable of human beings, an ambitious and wasted woman: that she brought a very cultivated intellect into a very cultivated society; that she gave to that society what it was most anxious to receive, and received from it all which it had to bestow,—and yet that this all was to her as nothing. The high intellectual world of England has never been so compact, so visible in a certain sense, so enjoyable, as it was in her time; she had a mind to understand it, beauty to adorn it, and wit to amuse it: but she chose to pass a great part of her life in exile, and returned at last to die at home among a new generation, whose name[s] she hardly knew, and to whom she herself was but a spectacle and a wonder.

Lady Mary Pierrepont — for that was by birth her name — belonged to a family which had a traditional reputation for ability and cultivation. The "Memoirs of Lucy Hutchinson" — almost the only legacy that remains to us from the first generation of refined Puritans; the only book, at any rate, which effectually brings home to us how different they were in taste and in temper from their more vulgar and feeble successors — contains a curious panegyric on *wise William* Pierrepont, to whom the Parliamentary party resorted as an oracle of judgment, and whom Cromwell himself, if tradition may be trusted, at times condescended to "consult and court." He did not, however, transmit much of his discretion to his grandson, Lady Mary's father. This nobleman — for he inherited from an elder branch of the family both the marquisate of Dorchester and the dukedom of Kingston — was a mere "man about town," as the homely phrase then went, who passed a long life of fashionable idleness interspersed with political intrigue, and who signalized his old age by marrying a young beauty of

Digitized by Google

fewer years than his youngest daughter, who (as he very likely knew) cared nothing for him and much for another person. He had the "grand air," however, and he expected his children, when he visited them, to kneel down immediately and ask his blessing,—which, if his character was what is said, must have been *very* valuable. The only attention he ever (that we know of) bestowed upon Lady Mary was a sort of theatrical outrage, pleasant enough to her at the time, but scarcely in accordance with the educational theories in which we now believe. He was a member of the Kit-Cat,—a great Whig club, the Brooks's of Queen Anne's time, which like Brooks's appears not to have been purely political, but to have found time for occasional relaxation and for somewhat unbusinesslike discussions. They held annually a formal meeting to arrange the female toasts for that year; and we are told that "a whim seized" her father "to nominate" Lady Mary, "then not eight years old, a candidate, alleging that she was far prettier than any lady on their list. The other members demurred, because the rules of the club forbade them to elect a beauty whom they had never seen. 'Then you shall see her,' cried he; and in the gayety of the moment sent orders home to have her finely dressed and brought to him at the tavern, where she was received with acclamations, her claim unanimously allowed, her health drunk by every one present, and her name engraved in due form upon a drinking-glass. The company consisting of some of the most eminent men in England, she went from the lap of one poet or patriot or statesman to the arms of another, was feasted with sweetmeats, overwhelmed with caresses, and—what perhaps already pleased her better than either—heard her wit and beauty loudly extolled on every side. Pleasure, she said, was too poor a word to express her sensations, —they amounted to ecstasy; never again, throughout her whole future life, did she pass so happy a day. Nor, indeed, could she; for the love of admiration,

Digitized by Google

which this scene was calculated to excite or increase, could never again be so fully gratified: there is always some allaying ingredient in the cup, some drawback upon the triumphs, of grown people. Her father carried on the frolic, and (we may conclude) confirmed the taste, by having her picture painted for the club-room, that she might be enrolled a regular toast."* Perhaps some young ladies of more than eight years old would not much object to have lived in those times. Fathers may be wiser now than they were then, but they rarely make themselves so thoroughly agreeable to their children.

This stimulating education would leave a weak and vain girl still more vain and weak; but it had not that effect on Lady Mary. Vain she probably was, and her father's boastfulness perhaps made her vainer; but her vanity took an intellectual turn. She read vaguely and widely; she managed to acquire some knowledge — how much is not clear — of Greek and Latin, and certainly learned with sufficient thoroughness French and Italian. She used to say that she had "one of the worst [educations] in the world," and that it was only by the "help of an uncommon memory and indefatigable labor" that she had acquired her remarkable attainments. Her father certainly seems to have been capable of any degree of inattention and neglect; but we should not perhaps credit too entirely all the legends which an old lady recounted to her grandchildren of the intellectual difficulties of her youth.

She seems to have been encouraged by her grandmother, one of the celebrated Evelyn family, whose memory is thus enigmatically but still expressively enshrined in the "Diary" of the author of "Sylva":— "Under the date," we are informed, "of the 2d of July, 1649, he records a day spent at Godstone, where Sir John" (this lady's father) "was on a visit with

* By a curious blunder, nearly all this extract has been hitherto printed without quotation marks, as Bagehot's own words. — ED.

Digitized by Google

this daughter, and he adds: 'Mem. — The prodigious memory of Sir John of Wilts's daughter, since married to Mr. W.* Pierrepont.'" The lady who was thus formidable in her youth deigned in her old age to write frequently, as we should now say, [to] — to open a "regular commerce" of letters, as was said in that age, with — Lady Mary when quite a girl, which she always believed to have been beneficial to her, and probably believed rightly; for she was intelligent enough to comprehend what was said to her, and the old lady had watched many changes in many things.

Her greatest intellectual guide, at least so in after life she used to relate, was Mr. Wortley, whom she afterwards married. "When I was young," she said, "I was a great admirer of Ovid's 'Metamorphoses,' and that was one of the chief reasons that set me upon the thoughts of stealing the Latin language. Mr. Wortley was the only person to whom I communicated my design, and he encouraged me in it. I used to study five or six hours a day for two years in my father's library; and so got that language, whilst everybody else thought I was reading nothing but novels and romances." She perused, however, some fiction also; for she possessed till her death "the whole library of Mrs. Lennox's 'Female Quixote,'" a ponderous series of novels in folio, in one of which she "had written in her fairest youthful hand the names and characteristic qualities of . . . the beautiful Diana, the volatile Climene, the melancholy Doris, Celadon the faithful, Adamas the wise, and so on, forming two long columns." †

* A mistake for "R." — ED.

† This is a curious tangle of blunders, partly copied from Lady Louisa Stuart (whose seeming error in the original is probably caused by wrong punctuation) and partly gratuitous. Mrs. Lennox's "Female Quixote" was not itself the "library": it formed only two volumes of the "ponderous series of novels" (which were not folios, but quartos and octavos), the remainder comprising translations of Mme. de Scuderi, Calprenede, D'Urfé, etc., — the "Astræa" of which last-named author was the romance annotated as here described. — ED.

Digitized by Google

Of Mr. Wortley's character it is not difficult, from the materials before us, to decipher the features: he was a slow man with a taste for quick companions. Swift's diary to Stella mentions an evening spent over a bottle of old wine with Mr. Wortley and Mr. Addison. Mr. Wortley was a rigid Whig, and Swift's transition to Toryism soon broke short that friendship; but with Addison he maintained an intimacy which lasted during their joint lives, and survived the marriages of both. With Steele likewise he was upon the closest terms; is said to have written some papers in the *Tatler* and *Spectator*, and the second volume of the former is certainly dedicated to him in affectionate and respectful terms.

Notwithstanding, however, these conspicuous testimonials to high ability, Mr. Wortley was an orderly and dull person. Every letter received by him from his wife, during five-and-twenty years of absence, was found at his death carefully indorsed with the date of its arrival and with a synopsis of its contents. "He represented," we are told, "at various times, Huntingdon, Westminster, and Peterborough in Parliament, and appears to have been a member of that class who win respectful attention by sober earnestness and business qualities;" and his name is constantly found in the drier and more formal part of the politics of the time. He answered to the description given more recently of a similar person*:— "Is not," it was asked, "Sir John —— a very methodical person?" "Certainly he is," was the reply: "he files his invitations to dinner." The Wortley papers, according to the description of those who have inspected them, seem to contain the accumulations of similar documents during many years. He hoarded money, however, to more purpose, for he died one of the richest commoners in England; and a considerable part of the now marvelous wealth of the Bute family seems at first to have been derived from him.

* "Irish wine." — Oct. 20, 1710.

Digitized by Google

Whatever good qualities Addison and Steele discovered in Mr. Wortley, they were certainly not those of a good writer. We have from his pen and from that of Lady Mary a description of the state of English politics during the three first years of George I., and any one who wishes to understand how much readability depends upon good writing would do well to compare the two. Lady Mary's is a clear and bright description of all the superficial circumstances of the time; Mr. Wortley's is equally superficial, often unintelligible and always lumbering, and scarcely succeeds in telling us more than that the writer was wholly unsuccessful in all which he tried to do. As to Mr. Wortley's contributions to the periodicals of his time, we may suspect that the jottings preserved at Sandon are all which he ever wrote of them, and that the style and arrangement were supplied by more skillful writers. Even a county member might furnish headings for the *Saturday Review:* he might say, "'Trent' British vessel — Americans always intrusive — Support Government — Kill all that is necessary."

What Lady Mary discovered in Mr. Wortley it is easier to say, and shorter; for he was very handsome. If his portrait can be trusted, there was a placid and business-like repose about him which might easily be attractive to a rather excitable and wild young lady, especially when combined with imposing features and a quiet sweet expression. He attended *to her* also. When she was a girl of fourteen, he met her at a party and evinced his admiration; and a little while later, it is not difficult to fancy that a literary young lady might be much pleased with a good-looking gentleman not uncomfortably older than herself, yet having a place in the world, and well known to the literary men of the age. He was acquainted with the classics too, or was supposed to be so; and whether it was a consequence of or a preliminary to their affections, Lady Mary wished to know the classics also.

Digitized by Google

Bishop Burnet was so kind as to superintend the singular studies — for such they were clearly thought — of this aristocratic young lady; and the translation of the "Enchiridion" of Epictetus, which he revised, is printed in this edition of her works. But even so grave an undertaking could not wholly withdraw her from more congenial pursuits. She commenced a correspondence with Miss Wortley, Mr. Wortley's unmarried sister, which still remains; though Miss Wortley's letters are hardly to be called hers, for her brother composed and she merely copied them. The correspondence is scarcely in the sort of English or in the tone which young ladies, we understand, now use.

"It is as impossible," says Miss Wortley, "for my dearest Lady Mary to utter a thought that can seem dull as to put on a look that is not beautiful. Want of wit is a fault that those who envy you most would not be able to find in your kind compliments. To me they seem perfect, since repeated assurances of your kindness forbid me to question their sincerity. You have often found that the most angry, nay, the most neglectful air you can assume, has made as deep a wound as the kindest; and these lines of yours, that you tax with dullness (perhaps because they were writ when you was not in a right humor, or when your thoughts were elsewhere employed), are so far from deserving the imputation, that the very turn of your expression, had I forgot the rest of your charms, would be sufficient to make me lament the only fault you have,— your inconstancy."

To which the reply is:—

"I am infinitely obliged to you, my dear Mrs.* Wortley, for the wit, beauty, and other fine qualities you so generously bestow upon me. Next to receiving them from Heaven, you are the person from

* "In the phraseology of those days, *Miss*, which had hardly yet ceased to be a term of reproach, still denoted childishness, flippancy, or some other contemptible quality, and was rarely applied to young ladies of a respectable class. In Steele's *Guardian*, the youngest of Nestor Ironside's wards, aged fifteen, is Mrs. Mary Lizard. Nay, Lady Bute herself could remember having been styled 'Mrs. Wortley' when a child, by two or three elderly visitors, as tenacious of their ancient modes of speech as of other old fashions." — *Lady Louisa Stuart's "Anecdotes."* Scott used this form as late as 1826, in "Woodstock"; and "Miss" by itself carries a slur even yet. — Ed.

Digitized by Google

whom I would choose to receive gifts and graces: I am very well satisfied to owe them to your own delicacy of imagination, which represents to you the idea of a fine lady, and you have good nature enough to fancy I am she. All this is mighty well, but you do not stop there; imagination is boundless. After giving me imaginary wit and beauty, you give me imaginary passions, and you tell me I'm in love: if I am, 'tis a perfect sin of ignorance, for I don't so much as know the man's name; I have been studying these three hours, and cannot guess who you mean. I passed the days of Nottingham races [at] Thoresby without seeing, or even wishing to see, one of the sex. Now, if I am in love, I have very hard fortune to conceal it so industriously from my own knowledge, and yet discover it so much to other people. 'Tis against all form to have such a passion as that, without giving one sigh for the matter. Pray tell me the name of him I love, that I may (according to the laudable custom of lovers) sigh to the woods and groves hereabouts, and teach it to the echo."

After some time Miss Wortley unfortunately died, and there was an obvious difficulty in continuing the correspondence without the aid of an appropriate sisterly screen. Mr. Wortley seems to have been tranquil and condescending; perhaps he thought placid tactics would be most effective, for Lady Mary was not so calm. He sent her some *Tatlers*, and received by way of thanks the following tolerably encouraging letter:—

"I am surprised at one of the *Tatlers* you send me: is it possible to have any sort of esteem for a person one believes capable of having such trifling inclinations? Mr. Bickerstaff has very wrong notions of our sex. I can say there are some of us that despise charms of show, and all the pageantry of greatness, perhaps with more ease than any of the philosophers. In contemning the world, they seem to take pains to contemn it: we despise it, without taking the pains to read lessons of morality to make us do it. At least I know I have always looked upon it with contempt, without being at the expense of one serious reflection to oblige me to it. I carry the matter yet farther: was I to choose of two thousand pounds a year or twenty thousand, the first would be my choice. There is something of an unavoidable *embarras* in making what is called a great figure in the world: [it] takes off from the happiness of life; I hate the noise and hurry inseparable from great estates

Digitized by Google

and titles, and look upon both as blessings that ought only to be given to fools, for 'tis only to them that they are blessings. The pretty fellows you speak of, I own entertain me sometimes; but is it impossible to be diverted with what one despises? I can laugh at a puppet-show; at the same time I know there is nothing in it worth my attention or regard. General notions are generally wrong. Ignorance and folly are thought the best foundations for virtue, as if not knowing what a good wife is was necessary to make one so. I confess that can never be my way of reasoning: as I always forgive an *injury* when I think it not done out of malice, I can never think myself *obliged* by what is done without design. Give me leave to say it (I know it sounds vain), I know how to make a man of sense happy; but then that man must resolve to contribute something towards it himself. I have so much esteem for you, I should be very sorry to hear you was unhappy; but for the world I would not be the instrument of making you so, which (of the humor you are) is hardly to be avoided if I am your wife. You distrust me: I can neither be easy, nor loved, where I am distrusted. Nor do I believe your passion for me is what you pretend it; at least I am sure was I in love I could not talk as you do. Few women would have spoken so plainly as I have done; but to dissemble is among the things I never do. I take more pains to approve my conduct to myself than to the world; and would not have to accuse myself of a minute's deceit. I wish I loved you enough to devote myself to be forever miserable, for the pleasure of a day or two's happiness. I cannot resolve upon it. You must think otherwise of me, or not all.

"I don't enjoin you to burn this letter: I know you will. 'Tis the first I ever writ to one of your sex, and shall be the last. You must never expect another. I resolve against all correspondence of the kind: my resolutions are seldom made, and never broken."

Mr. Wortley, however, still grumbled. He seems to have expected a young lady to do something even more decisive than ask him to marry her: he continued to hesitate and pause. The lady in the comedy says, "What right has a man to intend unless he states his intentions?" and Lady Mary's biographers are entirely of that opinion,—they think her exceedingly ill-used and Mr. Wortley exceedingly to blame. And so it may have been; certainly, a love correspondence is rarely found where activity and

Digitized by Google

intrepidity on the lady's side so much contrast with quiescence and timidity on the gentleman's. If, however, we could summon him before us, probably Mr. Wortley would have something to answer on his own behalf. It is tolerably plain that he thought Lady Mary too excitable. "Certainly," he doubtless reasoned, "she is a handsome young lady, and very witty; but beauty and wit are dangerous as well as attractive. Vivacity is delightful; but my esteemed friend Mr. Addison has observed that excessive quickness of parts is not unfrequently the cause of extreme rapidity in action. Lady Mary makes love to me before marriage, and I like it; but may she not make love also to some one else after marriage? and then I shall not like it." Accordingly he writes to her timorously as to her love of pleasure, her love of romantic reading, her occasional toleration of younger gentlemen and quicker admirers. At last, however, he proposed; and as far as the lady was concerned, there was no objection.

We might have expected, from a superficial view of the facts, that there would have been no difficulty either on the side of her father. Mr. Wortley died one of the richest commoners in England; was of the first standing in society, of good family, and he had apparently, therefore, money to settle and station to offer to his bride. And he did offer both: he was ready to settle an ample sum on Lady Mary, both as his wife and as his widow, and was anxious that if they married, they should live in a manner suitable to her rank and his prospects. But nevertheless, there was a difficulty. The *Tatler* had recently favored its readers with dissertations upon social ethics not altogether dissimilar to those with which the *Saturday Review* frequently instructs its readers. One of these dissertations* contained an elaborate exposure of the folly of settling your estate upon your

*No. 223, Sept. 12, 1710.

Digitized by Google

unborn children. The arguments were of a sort very easily imaginable. Why, it was said, should you give away that which you have to a person whom you do not know; whom you may never see, whom you may not like when you do see; who may be undutiful, unpleasant, or idiotic? Why, too, should each generation surrender its due control over the next? When the family estate is settled, men of the world know that the father's control is gone, for disinterested filial affection is an unfrequent though doubtless possible virtue; but so long as *property* is in suspense, all expectants will be attentive to those who have it in their power to give or not to give it. These arguments had converted Mr. Wortley, who is said even to have contributed notes for the article; and they seem to have converted Lady Mary also. She was to have her money, and the most plain-spoken young ladies do not commonly care to argue much about the future provision for their possible children: the subject is always delicate and a little frightful, and on the whole must be left to themselves. But Lord Dorchester, her father, felt it his duty to be firm. It is an old saying, that "You never know where a man's conscience may turn up," and the advent of ethical feeling was in this case even unusually beyond calculation. Lord Dorchester had never been an anxious father, and was not now going to be a liberal father; he had never cared much about Lady Mary, except in so far as he could himself gain *éclat* by exhibiting her youthful beauty, and he was not now at her marriage about to do at all more than was necessary and decent in his station: it was not, therefore, apparently probable that he would be irritatingly obstinate respecting the income of his daughter's children. He was so, however. He deemed it a duty to see that "*his* grandchildren never should be beggars," and — for what reason does not so clearly appear — wished that his eldest male grandchild should be immensely richer than all his other grandchildren.

Digitized by Google

The old feudal aristocrat, often in modern Europe so curiously disguised in the indifferent exterior of a careless man of the world, was, as became him, dictatorial and unalterable upon the duty of founding a family. Though he did not care much for his daughter, he cared much for the position of his daughter's eldest son. He had probably stumbled on the fundamental truth that "girls were girls, and boys were boys," and was disinclined to disregard the rule of primogeniture by which he had obtained his marquisate, and from which he expected a dukedom.

Mr. Wortley, however, was through life a man, if eminent in nothing else, eminent at least in obstinacy. He would not give up the doctrine of the *Tatler* even to obtain Lady Mary. The match was accordingly abandoned, and Lord Dorchester looked out for and found another gentleman whom he proposed to make his son-in-law; for he believed, according to the old morality, "that it was the duty of the parents to find a husband for a daughter, and that when he was found, it was the daughter's duty to marry him." It was as wrong in her to attempt to choose as in him to neglect to seek. Lady Mary was, however, by no means disposed to accept this passive theory of female obligation. She *had* sought and chosen; and to her choice she intended to adhere. The conduct of Mr. Wortley would have offended some ladies, but it rather augmented her admiration. She had exactly that sort of irritable intellect which sets an undue value on new theories of society and morality, and is pleased when others do so too. She thought Mr. Wortley was quite right not to "defraud himself for a possible infant," and admired his constancy and firmness. She determined to risk a step, as she herself said, unjustifiable to her own relatives, but which she nevertheless believed that she could justify to herself: she decided on eloping with Mr. Wortley.

Before, however, taking this audacious leap, she looked a little. Though she did not object to the

Digitized by Google

sacrifice of the customary inheritance of her contingent son, she by no means approved of sacrificing the settlement which Mr. Wortley had undertaken at a prior period of the negotiation to make upon herself. And according to common-sense, she was undoubtedly judicious. She was going from her father, and foregoing the money which he had promised her; and therefore it was not reasonable that by going *to* her lover, she should forfeit also the money which *he* had promised her. And there is nothing offensive in her mode of expression. "'Tis something odd for a woman that brings nothing to expect anything; but after the way of my education, I dare not pretend to live but in some degree suitable to it. I had rather die than return to a dependency upon relations I have disobliged. Save me from that fear, if you love me. If you cannot, or think I ought not to expect it, be sincere and tell me so. 'Tis better I should not be yours at all, than for a short happiness involve myself in ages of misery. I hope there will never be occasion for this precaution; but, however, 'tis necessary to make it." But true and rational as all this seems, perhaps it is still truer and still more rational to say that if a woman has not sufficient confidence in her lover to elope with him without a previous promise of a good settlement, she had better not elope with him at all. After all, if he declines to make the stipulated settlement, the lady will have either to return to her friends or to marry without it, and she would have the full choice between these satisfactory alternatives even if she asked no previous promise from her lover. At any rate, the intrusion of coarse money among the refined materials of romance is in this case even more curious and remarkable than usual.

After some unsuccessful attempts, Lady Mary and Mr. Wortley did elope and did marry; and after a certain interval, of course, Lord Dorchester received them, notwithstanding their contempt of his authority,

Digitized by Google

into some sort of favor and countenance. They had probably saved him money by their irregularity, and economical frailties are rarely judged severely by men of fashion who are benefited by them. Lady Mary, however, was long a little mistrusted by her own relations, and never seems to have acquired much family influence; but her marriage was not her only peculiarity, or the only one which impartial relations might dislike.

The pair appear to have been for a little while tolerably happy. Lady Mary was excitable, and wanted letters when absent and attention when present: Mr. Wortley was heavy and slow, could not write letters when away and seemed torpid in her society when at home. Still, these are common troubles. Common, too, is the matrimonial correspondence upon baby's deficiency in health, and on Mrs. Behn's opinion that "the cold bath is the best medicine for weak children." It seems an odd end to a deferential perusal of Latin authors in girlhood, and to a spirited elopement with the preceptor in after years; but the transition is only part of the usual irony of human life.

The world, both social and political, into which Lady Mary was introduced by her marriage was singularly calculated to awaken the faculties, to stimulate the intellect, to sharpen the wit, and to harden the heart of an intelligent, witty, and hard-headed woman. The world of London — even the higher world — is now too large to be easily seen or to be pithily described. The elements are so many, their position is so confused, the display of their mutual counteraction is so involved, that many years must pass away before even a very clever woman can thoroughly comprehend it all. She will cease to be young and handsome long ere she does comprehend it. And when she at last understands it, it does not seem a fit subject for concise and summary wit. Its evident complexity refuses to be condensed into pithy

Digitized by Google

sayings and brilliant *bons-mots*. It has fallen into the hands of philosophers, with less brains perhaps than the satirists of our fathers, but with more anxiety to tell the whole truth, more toleration for the many-sidedness of the world; with less of sharp conciseness, but perhaps with more of useful completeness. As are the books, so are the readers. People do not wish to read satire nowadays; the epigrams even of Pope would fall dull and dead upon this serious and investigating time. The folly of the last age affected levity: the folly of this, as we all know, encases itself in ponderous volumes which defy refutation, in elaborate arguments which prove nothing, in theories which confuse the uninstructed and which irritate the well-informed. The folly of a hundred years since was at least the folly of Vivien; but ours is the folly of Merlin.

> "*You* read the book, my pretty Vivien! . . .
> And none can read the text, not even I,
> And none can read the comment but myself. . . .
> Oh, the results are simple!"*

Perhaps people did not know then as much as they know now; indisputably they knew nothing like so much in a superficial way *about* so many things: but they knew far more correctly where their knowledge began and where it stopped, what they thought and why they thought it; they had readier illustrations and more summary phrases; they could say at once what it *came to*, and to what action it should lead.

The London of the eighteenth century was an aristocratic world, which lived to itself; which displayed the virtues and developed the vices of an aristocracy which was under little fear of external control or check; which had emancipated itself from the control of the Crown, which had not fallen under the control of the *bourgeoisie;* which saw its own life, and saw that according to its own maxims it was good. Public opinion now rules; and it is an opinion which constrains the conduct and narrows

* Tennyson, "Merlin and Vivien."

Digitized by Google

the experience and dwarfs the violence and minimizes the frankness of the higher classes, while it diminishes their vices, supports their conscience, and precludes their grossness. There was nothing like this in the last century, especially in the early part of it. The aristocracy came to town from their remote estates, — where they were uncontrolled by any opinion or by any equal society, and where the eccentricities and personalities of each character were fostered and exaggerated, — to a London which was like a large county town, in which everybody of rank knew everybody of rank, where the eccentricities of each rural potentate came into picturesque collision with the eccentricities of other rural potentates, where the most minute allusions to the peculiarities and the career of the principal persons were instantly understood, where squibs were on every table and where satire was in the air. No finer field of social observation could be found for an intelligent and witty woman. Lady Mary understood it at once.

Nor was the political life of the last century so unfavorable to the influence and so opposed to the characteristic comprehension of women as our present life. We are now ruled by political discussion and by a popular assembly, by leading articles and by the House of Commons; but women can scarcely ever compose leaders, and no woman sits in our representative chamber. The whole tide of abstract discussion which fills our mouths and deafens our ears, the whole complex accumulation of facts and figures to which we refer everything and which we apply to everything, is quite unfemale. A lady has an insight into what she sees; but how will this help her with the case of the "Trent," with the proper structure of a representative chamber, with Indian finance or parliamentary reform? Women are clever, but cleverness of itself is nothing at present. A sharp Irish writer described himself as "bothered intirely by the want of preliminary information": women are in the

Digitized by Google

same difficulty now. Their nature may hereafter change, as some sanguine advocates suggest; but the visible species certainly have not the intellectual providence to acquire the vast stores of dry information which alone can enable them to judge adequately of our present controversies. We are ruled by a machinery of oratory and discussion, in which women have no share and which they hardly comprehend; we are engaged on subjects which need an arduous learning, to which they have no pretensions.

In the last century much of this was very different. The court still counted for much in English politics. The House of Commons was the strongest power in the state machine, but it was not so immeasurably the strongest power as now. It was absolutely supreme within its sphere, but that sphere was limited. It could absolutely control the money, and thereby the policy, of the state; whether there should be peace or war, excise or no excise, it could and did despotically determine, — it was supreme in its choice of *measures:* but on the other hand, it had only a secondary influence in the choice of *persons.* Who the Prime Minister was to be, was a question not only theoretically determinable, but in fact determined, by the sovereign. The House of Commons could despotically impose two conditions: first, that the Prime Minister should be a man of sufficient natural ability and sufficient parliamentary experience to conduct the business of his day; secondly, that he should adopt the policy which the nation wished: but subject to a conformity with these prerequisites, the selection of the king was nearly uncontrolled. Sir Robert Walpole was the greatest master of parliamentary tactics and political business in his generation; he was a statesman of wide views and consummate dexterity: but these intellectual gifts, even joined to immense parliamentary experience, were not alone sufficient to make him and to keep him Prime Minister of England. He also maintained, during two

Digitized by Google

reigns, a complete system of court strategy. During the reign of George II. he kept a *queen-watcher:* Lord Hervey, one of the cleverest men in England, — the keenest observer, perhaps, in England, —was induced, by very dexterous management, to remain at court during many years to observe the Queen, to hint to the Queen, to remove wrong impressions from the Queen, to confirm the Walpolese predilections of the Queen, to report every incident to Sir Robert. The records of politics tell us few stranger tales than that it should have been necessary for the Sir Robert Peel of the age to hire a subordinate as safe as Eldon and as witty as Canning, for the sole purpose of managing a clever German woman to whom the selection of a Prime Minister was practically intrusted. Nor was this the only court campaign which Sir Robert had to conduct, or in which he was successful. Lady Mary, who hated him much, has satirically described the foundation upon which his court favor rested during the reign of George I. :—

"The new court with all their train was arrived before I left the country. The Duke of Marlborough was returned in a sort of triumph, with the apparent merit of having suffered for his fidelity to the succession, and was reinstated in his office of general, etc. In short, all people who had suffered any hardship or disgrace during the late ministry would have it believed that it was occasioned by their attachment to the House of Hanover. Even Mr. Walpole, who had been sent to the Tower for a piece of bribery proved upon him, was called a confessor to the cause. But he had another piece of good luck that yet more contributed to his advancement: he had a very handsome sister, — whose folly had lost her reputation in London,* but the yet greater folly of Lord Townshend, who happened to be a neighbor in Norfolk to Mr. Walpole, had occasioned his being drawn in to marry her some months before the Queen died.

* No better illustration exists of the rotten-*heartedness* of the time than this ancient scandal. Dolly Walpole's sole offense was accepting an invitation from her friend and *chaperon*, Lady Wharton, to spend a few days at the latter's house, in ignorance of the fact that Lord Wharton's character blasted the reputation of any woman he came near; but this virtuous society, where open adultery was scarcely even a matter of shame, considered this shadowy taint as unfitting her for its circles. — Ed.

Digitized by Google

"Lord Townshend had that sort of understanding which commonly makes men honest in the first part of their lives: they follow the instructions of their tutor, and till somebody thinks it worth their while to show them a new path, go regularly on in the road where they are set. Lord Townshend had then been many years an excellent husband to a sober wife, a kind master to all his servants and dependents, a serviceable relation wherever it was in his power, and followed the instinct of nature in being fond of his children. Such a sort of behavior, without any glaring absurdity either in prodigality or avarice, always gains a man the reputation of reasonable and honest; and this was his character when the Earl of Godolphin sent him envoy to the States, not doubting but he would be faithful to his orders without giving himself the trouble of criticizing on them, which is what all ministers wish in an envoy. Robotun, a French refugee (secretary to Bernstoff, one of the Elector of Hanover's ministers), happened then to be at the Hague, and was civilly received at Lord Townshend's, who treated him at his table with the English hospitality; and he was charmed with a reception which his birth and education did not entitle him to. Lord Townshend was recalled when the Queen changed her ministry; his wife died, and he retired into the country, where (as I have said before) Walpole had art enough to make him marry his sister Dolly. At that time, I believe, he did not propose much more advantage by the match than to get rid of a girl that lay heavy on his hands.

"When King George ascended the throne, he was surrounded by all his German ministers and playfellows ,male and female. Baron Goritz was the most considerable among them both for birth and fortune: he had managed the King's treasury thirty years with the utmost fidelity and economy; and had the true German honesty, being a plain, sincere, and unambitious man. Bernstoff, the secretary, was of a different turn: he was avaricious, artful, and designing, and had got his share in the King's councils by bribing his women. Robotun was employed in these matters, and had the sanguine ambition of a Frenchman. He resolved there should be an English ministry of his choosing: and knowing none of them personally but Townshend, he had not failed to recommend him to his master, and his master to the King, as the only proper person for the important post of Secretary of State; and he entered upon that office with universal applause, having at that time a very popular character, which he might possibly have retained forever if he had not been entirely governed by his wife and her brother R. Walpole, whom he immediately advanced to be paymaster, — esteemed a post of exceeding profit, and very necessary for his indebted estate."*

* From a partly written history of her time, all destroyed but this scrap.

Digitized by Google

And it is indisputable that Lord Townshend, who thought he was a very great statesman, and who began as the patron of Sir Robert Walpole, nevertheless was only his court agent, — the manager on his behalf of the king and of the king's mistresses.

We need not point out at length — for the passage we have cited of itself indicates — how well suited this sort of politics is to the comprehension and to the pen of a keen-sighted and witty woman.

Nor was the court the principal improver of the London society of the age: the House of Commons was then a part of society. This separate, isolated, aristocratic world, of which we have spoken, had an almost undisputed command of both Houses in the Legislature. The letter of the Constitution did not give it them, and no law appointed that it should be so. But the aristocratic class were by far the most educated, by far the most respected, by far the most *eligible* part of the nation. Even in the boroughs, where there was universal suffrage or something near it, they were the favorites. Accordingly, they gave the tone to the House of Commons: they required the small community of members who did not belong to their order to conform as far as they could to their usages, and to guide themselves by their code of morality and of taste. In the main the House of Commons obeyed these injunctions, and it was repaid by being incorporated within the aristocratic world: it became not only the council of the nation, but the debating club of fashion. That which was "received" modified the recipient: the remains of the aristocratic society, wherever we find them, are penetrated not only with an aristocratic but with a political spirit; they breathe a sort of atmosphere of politics. In the London of the present day, the vast miscellaneous *bourgeois* London, we all know that this is not so. "In the country," said a splenetic observer, "people talk politics; at London dinners you talk nothing, — between two pillars of crinoline you eat and are

Digitized by Google

resigned." A hundred and fifty years ago, as far as our rather ample materials inform us, people in London talked politics just as they now talk politics in Worcestershire; and being on the spot, and cooped up with politicians in a small social world, their talk was commonly better. They knew the people of whom they spoke, even if they did not know the subjects with which they were concerned.

No element is better fitted to counteract the characteristic evil of an aristocratic society. The defect of such societies in all times has been frivolity. All talk has tended to become gossip; it has ceased to deal with important subjects, and has devoted itself entirely to unimportant incidents. Whether the Duc de —— has more or less prevailed with the Marquise de ——, is a sort of common form, into which any details may be fitted and any names inserted. The frivolities of gallantry — never very important save to some woman who has long been dead — fill the records of all aristocracies who lived under a despotism, who had no political authority, no daily political cares. The aristocracy of England in the last century was at any rate exempt from *this* reproach. There is in the records of it not only an intellectuality, — which would prove little, for every clever describer, by the subtleties of his language and the arrangement of his composition, gives a sort of intellectuality even to matters which have no pretension to it themselves, — but likewise a pervading medium of political discussion. The very language in which they are written is the language of political business. Horace Walpole was certainly by nature no politician and no orator; yet no discerning critic can read a page of his voluminous remains without feeling that the writer has through life lived with politicians and talked with politicians. A keen observant mind, not naturally political, but capable of comprehending and viewing any subject which was brought before it, has chanced to have this particular subject — politics —

Digitized by Google

presented to it for a lifetime; and all its delineations, all its efforts, all its thoughts reflect it and are colored by it. In all the records of the eighteenth century, the tonic of business is seen to combat the relaxing effect of habitual luxury.

This element, too, is favorable to a clever woman. The more you can put before such a person, the greater she will be; the less her world, the less she is. If you place the most keen-sighted lady in the midst of the pure futilities and unmitigated flirtations of an aristocracy, she will sink to the level of those elements, and will scarcely seem to wish for anything more or to be competent for anything higher. But if she is placed in an intellectual atmosphere, in which political or other important subjects are currently passing, you will probably find that she can talk better upon them than you can, without your being able to explain whence she derived either her information or her talent.

The subjects, too, which were discussed in the political society of the last age were not so inscrutable to women as our present subjects; and even when there were great difficulties, they were more on a level with men in the discussion of them than they now are. It was no disgrace to be destitute of preliminary information at a time in which there were no accumulated stores from which such information could be derived. A lightening element of female influence is therefore to be found through much of the politics of the eighteenth century.

Lady Mary entered easily into all this world, both social and political. She had beauty for the fashionable, satire for the witty, knowledge for the learned, and intelligence for the politician. She was not too refined to shrink from what we now consider the coarseness of that time. Many of her verses themselves are scarcely adapted for our decorous pages. Perhaps the following give no unfair idea of her ordinary state of mind: —

Digitized by Google

"TOWN ECLOGUES.

"ROXANA; OR, THE DRAWING-ROOM.

"Roxana, from the court retiring late,
Sighed her soft sorrows at St. James's gate.
Such heavy thoughts lay brooding in her breast,
Not her own chairmen with more weight oppressed;
They groan the cruel load they're doomed to bear;
She in these gentle sounds expressed her care:—
'Was it for this that I these roses wear?
For this new-set the jewels for my hair?
Ah, Princess! with what zeal have I pursued!
Almost forgot the duty of a prude.
Thinking I never could attend too soon,
I've missed my prayers, to get me dressed by noon.
For thee, ah! what for thee did I resign!
My pleasures, passions, all that e'er was mine.
I sacrificed both modesty and ease:
Left operas and went to filthy plays,
Double-entendres shock my tender ear,—
Yet even this for thee I choose to bear.
'In glowing youth, when nature bids be gay,
And every joy of life before me lay,
By honor prompted and by pride restrained,
The pleasures of the young my soul disdained:
Sermons I sought, and with a mien severe
Censured my neighbors, and said daily prayer.
'Alas! how changed—with the same sermon-mien
That once I pray'd, the *What-d'ye-call't** I've seen.
Ah! cruel Princess, for thy sake I've lost
That reputation which so dear had cost:
I, who avoided every public place,
When bloom and beauty bade me show my face,
Now near thee constant every night abide
With never-failing duty by thy side;
Myself and daughters standing on a row,
To all the foreigners a goodly show!
Oft had your drawing-room been sadly thin,
And merchants' wives close by the chair been seen,
Had not I amply filled the empty space,
And saved your Highness from the dire disgrace.

*A mock-tragedy by Gay.

Digitized by Google

'Yet Coquetilla's artifice prevails,
When all my merit and my duty fails;
That Coquetilla, whose deluding airs
Corrupt our virgins, still our youth ensnares.
So sunk her character, so lost her fame,
Scarce visited before your Highness came;
Yet for the bed-chamber 'tis her you choose,
When zeal and fame and virtue you refuse.
Ah, worthy choice! not one of all your train
Whom censure blasts not, and dishonors stain!
Let the nice hind now suckle dirty pigs,
And the proud pea-hen hatch the cuckoo's eggs!
Let Iris leave her paint and own her age,
And grave Suffolka wed a giddy page!
A greater miracle is daily viewed,
A virtuous Princess with a court so lewd.
'I know thee, Court! with all thy treacherous wiles,
Thy false caresses and undoing smiles!
Ah, Princess! learned in all the courtly arts,
To cheat our hopes, and yet to gain our hearts!
'Large lovely bribes are the great statesman's aim;
And the neglected patriot follows fame.
The Prince is ogled; some the King pursue:
But your Roxana only follows you.
Despised Roxana, cease, and try to find
Some other, since the Princess proves unkind;
Perhaps it is not hard to find at court,
If not a greater, a more firm support.'"

There was every kind of rumor as to Lady Mary's own conduct, and we have no means of saying whether any of these rumors were true. There is no evidence against her which is worthy of the name. So far as can be proved, she was simply a gay, witty, bold-spoken, handsome woman, who made many enemies by unscrupulous speech and many friends by unscrupulous flirtation. We may believe, but we cannot prove, that she found her husband tedious, and was dissatisfied that his slow, methodical, *borné* mind made so little progress in the political world, and understood so little of what really passed there. Unquestionably she must have much preferred talking to Lord Hervey to talking with Mr. Montagu. But we

Digitized by Google

must not credit the idle scandals of a hundred years since because they may have been true, or because they appear not inconsistent with the characters of those to whom they relate. There were legends against every attractive and fashionable woman in that age, and most of the legends were doubtless exaggerations and inventions. We cannot know the truth of such matters now, and it would hardly be worth searching into if we could: but the important fact is certain, Lady Mary lived in a world in which the worst rumors were greedily told, and often believed, about her and others; and the moral refinement of a woman must always be impaired by such a contact.

Lady Mary was so unfortunate as to incur the partial dislike of one of the great recorders of that age, and the bitter hostility of the other: she was no favorite with Horace Walpole, and the bitter enemy of Pope. The first is easily explicable. Horace Walpole never loved his father, but recompensed himself by hating his father's enemies. No one connected with the opposition to Sir Robert is spared by his son, if there be a fair opportunity for unfavorable insinuation. Mr. Wortley Montagu was the very man for a grave mistake. He made the very worst that could be made in that age: he joined the party of constitutional exiles on the Opposition bench, who had no real objection to the policy of Sir Robert Walpole; who, when they had a chance, adopted that policy themselves; who were discontented because they had no power, and he had all the power. Probably, too, being a man eminently respectable, Mr. Montagu was frightened at Sir Robert's unscrupulous talk and not very scrupulous actions. At any rate, he opposed Sir Robert; and thence many a little observation of Horace Walpole's against Lady Mary.

Why Pope and Lady Mary quarreled is a question on which much discussion has been expended, and on which a judicious German professor might even now compose an interesting and exhaustive monograph.

Digitized by Google

A curt English critic will be more apt to ask why they should *not* have quarreled. We know that Pope quarreled with almost every one; we know that Lady Mary quarreled or half quarreled with most of her acquaintances: why then should they not have quarreled with one another?

It is certain that they were very intimate at one time; for Pope wrote to her some of the most pompous letters of compliment in the language. And the more intimate they were to begin with, the more sure they were to be enemies in the end. Human nature will not endure that sort of proximity. An irritable, vain poet, who always fancies that people are trying to hurt him, whom no argument could convince that every one is not perpetually thinking about him, cannot long be friendly with a witty woman of unscrupulous tongue, who spares no one, who could sacrifice a good friend for a bad *bon-mot*, who thinks of the person whom she is addressing, not of those about whom she is speaking. The natural relation of the two is that of victim and torturer, and no other will long continue. There appear also to have been some money matters (of all things in the world) between the two: Lady Mary was intrusted by Pope with some money to use in speculation during the highly fashionable panic which derives its name from the South-Sea Bubble; and as of course it was lost, Pope was very angry. Another story goes, that Pope made serious love to Lady Mary, and that she laughed at him; upon which a very personal and not always very correct controversy has arisen as to the probability or improbability of Pope's exciting a lady's feelings. Lord Byron took part in it with his usual acuteness and incisiveness, and did not leave the discussion more decent than he found it. Pope doubtless was deformed, and had not the large red health that uncivilized women admire; yet a clever lady might have taken a fancy to him, for the little creature knew what he was saying. There is, however,

Digitized by Google

no evidence that Lady Mary did so. We only know that there was a sudden coolness or quarrel between them, and that it was the beginning of a long and bitter hatred.

In their own times, Pope's sensitive disposition probably gave Lady Mary a great advantage,—her tongue perhaps gave him more pain than his pen gave her; but in later times she has fared the worse. What between Pope's sarcasms and Horace Walpole's anecdotes, Lady Mary's reputation has suffered very considerably. As we have said, her offences are *not proven*,—there is no evidence to convict her; but she is likely to be condemned upon the general doctrine that a person who is accused of much is probably guilty of something.

During many years Lady Mary continued to live a distinguished fashionable and social life, with a single remarkable break. This interval was her journey to Constantinople. The powers that then were, thought fit to send Mr. Wortley as ambassador to Constantinople, and his wife accompanied him. During that visit she kept a journal and wrote sundry real letters; out of which, after her return, she composed a series of unreal letters as to all she saw and did in Turkey and on the journey there and back, which were published, and which are still amusing if not always select reading. The Sultan was not then the "dying man": he was the "Grand Turk." He was not simply a potentate to be counted with, but a power to be feared. The appearance of a Turkish army on the Danube had in that age much the same effect as the appearance of a Russian army now: it was an object of terror and dread. A mission at Constantinople was not then a bureau for interference in Turkey, but a serious office for transacting business with a great European power. A European ambassador at Constantinople now presses on the government there impracticable reforms: he then asked for useful aid. Lady Mary was evidently impressed

Digitized by Google

by the power of the country in which she sojourned; and we observe in her letters evident traces of the notion that the Turk was the dread of Christendom, — which is singular now, when the Turk is its *protégé*.

Lady Mary had another advantage too. Many sorts of books make steady progress; a scientific treatise published now is sure to be fuller and better than one on the same subject written long ago. But with books of travel in a stationary country the presumption is the contrary; in that case the old book is probably the better book. The first traveler writes out a plain, straightforward description of the most striking objects with which he meets; he believes that his readers know nothing of the country of which he is writing, for till he visited it he probably knew nothing himself, and if he is sensible he describes simply and clearly all which most impresses him. He has no motive for not dwelling upon the principal things, and most likely will do so, as they are probably the most conspicuous. The second traveler is not so fortunate: he is always in terror of the traveler who went before. He fears the criticism, "This is all very well, *but* we knew the whole of it before: No. 1 said that at page 103." In consequence he is timid: he picks and skips; he fancies that you are acquainted with all which is great and important, and he dwells, for your good and to your pain, upon that which is small and unimportant. For ordinary readers no result can be more fatal. They perhaps never read — they certainly do not remember — anything upon the subject; the curious minutiæ, so elaborately set forth, are quite useless, for they have not the general framework in which to store them; not knowing much of the first traveler's work, that of the second is a supplement to a treatise with which they are unacquainted: in consequence they do not read it. Lady Mary made good use of her position in the front of the herd of tourists: she told us what

Digitized by Google

she saw in Turkey,—all the best of what she saw, and all the most remarkable things,—and told it very well.

Nor was this work the only fruit of her Turkish travels: she brought home the notion of inoculation. Like most improvers, she was roughly spoken to. Medical men were angry because the practice was not in their books, and conservative men were cross at the agony of a new idea; religious people considered it wicked to have a disease which Providence did not think fit to send you, and simple people "did not like to make themselves ill of their own accord." She triumphed, however, over all obstacles: inoculation, being really found to lengthen life and save complexions, before long became general. One of the first patients upon whom Lady Mary tried the novelty was her own son, and many considerate people thought it "worthy of observation" that he turned out a scamp. When he ran away from school, the mark of inoculation (then rare) was used to describe him, and after he was recovered he never did anything which was good. His case seems to have been the common one in which nature (as we speak) requites herself for the strong-headedness of several generations by the weakness of one. His father's and his mother's family had been rather able for some generations, the latter remarkably so; but this boy had always a sort of practical imbecility,—he was not stupid, but he never did anything right. He exemplified another curious trait of nature's practice. Mr. Montagu was obstinate, though sensible; Lady Mary was flighty, though clever. Nature combined the defects: young Edward Montagu was both obstinate and flighty. The only pleasure he can ever have given his parents was the pleasure of *feeling* their own wisdom: he showed that they were right before marriage in not settling the paternal property upon him, for he ran through every shilling he possessed. He was not sensible enough to keep his property,

Digitized by Google

and just not fool enough for the law to take it from him.

After her return from Constantinople, Lady Mary continued to lead the same half-gay and half-literary life as before; but at last she did not like it. Various ingenious inquirers into antiquated minutiæ have endeavored, without success, to discover reasons of detail which might explain her dissatisfaction. They have suggested that some irregular love affair was unprosperous, and hinted that she and her husband were not on good terms. The love affair, however, when looked for, cannot be found; and though she and her husband would appear to have been but distantly related, they never had any great quarrel which we know of. Neither seems to have been fitted to give the other much pleasure, and each had the fault of which the other was most impatient. Before marriage Lady Mary had charmed Mr. Montagu, but she had also frightened him; after marriage she frightened but did not charm him. He was formal and composed; she was flighty and *outrée*. "What *will* she do next?" was doubtless the poor man's daily feeling; and "Will he ever do anything?" was probably also hers. Torpid business, which is always going on but which never seems to come to anything, is simply aggravating to a clever woman. Even the least impatient lady can hardly endure a perpetual process for which there is little visible and nothing theatrical to show; and Lady Mary was by no means the least impatient. But there was no abrupt quarrel between the two; and a husband and wife who have lived together more than twenty years can generally manage to continue to live together during a second twenty years. These reasons of detail are scarcely the reasons for Lady Mary's wishing to break away from the life to which she had so long been used. Yet there was clearly some reason; for Lady Mary went abroad, and stayed there during many years.

Digitized by Google

We believe that the cause was not special and peculiar to the case, but general and due to the invariable principles of human nature, at all times and everywhere. If historical experience proves anything, it proves that the earth is not adapted for a life of mere intellectual pleasure. The life of a brute on earth, though bad, is possible. It is not even difficult to many persons to destroy the higher part of their nature by a continual excess in sensual pleasure. It is even more easy and possible to dull all the soul and most of the mind by a vapid accumulation of torpid comfort. Many of the middle classes spend their whole lives in a constant series of petty pleasures and an undeviating pursuit of small material objects. The gross pursuit of pleasure and the tiresome pursuit of petty comfort are quite suitable to "such a being as man in such a world as the present one."* What is not possible is, to combine the pursuit of pleasure and the enjoyment of comfort with the characteristic pleasures of a strong mind. If you wish for luxury, you must not nourish the inquisitive instinct. The great problems of human life are in the air; they are without us in the life we see, within us in the life we feel. A quick intellect feels them in a moment: it says, "Why am I here! What is pleasure, that I desire it? What is comfort, that I seek it? What are carpets and tables, what is the lust of the eye, what is the pride of life, that they should satisfy *me?* I was not made for such things. I hate them, because I have liked them; I loathe them, because it seems that there is nothing else for me." An impatient woman's intellect comes to this point in a moment: it says, "Society is good, but I have seen society. What is the use of talking, or hearing *bon-mots?* I have done both till I am tired of doing either. I have laughed till I have no wish to laugh again, and made others laugh till I have hated them for being such fools. As for instruction, I have seen the men of genius of my time; and they

* See note to Vol. II., page 109.

Digitized by Google

tell me nothing,—nothing of what I want to know. They are choked with intellectual frivolities. They cannot say 'whence I came and whither I go.' What do they know of themselves? It is not from literary people that we can learn anything; more likely, they will copy or try to copy the manners of lords, and make ugly love in bad imitation of those who despise them." Lady Mary felt this, as we believe. She had seen all the world of England, and it did not *satisfy*. She turned abroad, not in pursuit of definite good nor from fear of particular evil, but from a vague wish for some great change: from a wish to escape from a life which harassed the soul but did not calm it, which awakened the intellect without answering its questions.

She lived abroad for more than twenty years, at Avignon and Venice and elsewhere; and during that absence she wrote the letters which compose the greater part of her works. And there is no denying that they are good letters. The art of note-writing may become classical,—it is for the present age to provide models of that sort of composition,—but letters have perished. Nobody but a bore now takes pains enough to make them pleasant; and the only result of a bore's pains is to make them unpleasant. The correspondence of the present day is a continual labor without any visible achievement. The dying penny-a-liner said with emphasis, "That which I have written has perished." We might all say so of the mass of petty letters we write: they are a heap of small atoms, each with some interest individually, but with no interest as a whole; all the items concern us, but they all add up to nothing. In the last century, cultivated people who sat down to write a letter took pains to have something to say, and took pains to say it. The postage was perhaps ninepence; and it would be impudent to make a correspondent pay ninepence for nothing. Still more impudent was it, *after* having made him pay ninepence, to give him

Digitized by Google

the additional pain of making out what was half expressed. People, too, wrote to one another then, not unfrequently, who had long been separated, and who required much explanation and many details to make the life of each intelligible to the other. The correspondence of the nineteenth century is like a series of telegrams with amplified headings: there is not more than one idea, and that idea comes soon and is soon over. The best correspondence of the last age is rather like a good light article, — in which the points are studiously made; in which the effort to make them is studiously concealed; in which a series of selected circumstances is set forth; in which you feel, but are not told, that the principle of the writer's selection was to make his composition pleasant.

In letter-writing of this kind Lady Mary was very skillful. She has the highest merit of letter-writing, — she is concise without being affected. Fluency, which a great orator pronounced to be the curse of orators, is at least equally the curse of writers. There are many people, many ladies especially, who can write letters at any length, in any number, and at any time. We may be quite sure that the letters so written are not good letters. Composition of any sort implies consideration; you must see where you are going before you can go straight, or can pick your steps as you go. On the other hand, too much consideration is unfavorable to the ease of letter-writing, and perhaps of all writing. A letter too much studied wants flow: it is a museum of hoarded sentences; each sentence sounds effective, but the whole composition wants vitality; it was written with the memory instead of the mind: and every reader feels the effect, though only the critical reader can detect the cause. Lady Mary understood all this: she said what she had to say in words that were always graphic and always sufficiently good, but she avoided curious felicity; her expressions seem choice, but not chosen.

Digitized by Google

At the end of her life Lady Mary pointed a subordinate but not a useless moral. The masters of mundane ethics observe that "You should stay in the world or stay out of the world." Lady Mary did neither: she went out and tried to return. Horace Walpole thus describes the result:—

"Lady Mary Wortley is arrived; I have seen her; I think her avarice, her dirt, and her vivacity are all increased. Her dress, like her languages, is a *galimatias* of several countries; the groundwork rags, and the embroidery nastiness. She needs no cap, no handkerchief, no gown, no petticoat, no shoes. An old black-laced hood represents the first; the fur of a horseman's coat, which replaces the third, serves for the second; a dimity petticoat is deputy and officiates for the fourth; and slippers act the part of the last. When I was at Florence, and she was expected there, we were drawing *sortes Virgilianas* for her; we literally drew

"'Insanam vatem aspicies.'*

It would have been a stronger prophecy now even than it was then."

There is a description of what the favorite of society becomes after leaving it for years, and after indulging eccentricities for years! There is a commentary on the blunder of exposing yourself in your old age to young people, to whom you have always been a tradition and a name! Horace Walpole doubtless painted up a few trivialities a little; but one of the traits is true: Lady Mary lived before the age in which people waste half their lives in washing the whole of their persons.

Lady Mary did not live long after her return to England. Horace Walpole's letter is written on the 2d of February, 1762, and she died on the 21st of August in the same year. Her husband had died just before her return, and perhaps after so many years she would not have returned unless he had done so. *Requiescat in pace;* for she quarreled all her life.

* "You will see a mad prophetess" (or "poetess").—"Æneid," iii., 443.

Digitized by Google

*WILLIAM COWPER.**

(1855.)

[The chief source of Bagehot's facts in this article, though not referred to below, was Southey's admirable memoir and edition of Cowper's correspondence. — ED.]

FOR the English, after all, the best literature is the English: we understand the language; the manners are familiar to us, the scene at home, the associations our own. Of course a man who has not read Homer is like a man who has not seen the ocean: there is a great object of which he has no idea. But we cannot be always seeing the ocean: its face is always large, its smile is bright, the ever-sounding shore sounds on, yet we have no property in them; we stop and gaze, we pause and draw our breath, we look and wonder at the grandeur of the other world, but we live on shore. We fancy associations of unknown things and distant climes, of strange men and strange manners, but we are ourselves. Foreigners do not behave as we should, nor do the Greeks. What a strength of imagination, what a long practice, what a facility in the details of fancy is required to picture their past and unknown world! They are deceased. They are said to be immortal, because they have written a good epitaph: but they are gone; their life and their manners have passed away. We read with interest in the "Catalogue of the Ships" —

---

*Poetical Works of William Cowper. Edited by Robert Bell. J. W. Parker & Son.

The Life of William Cowper, with Selections from his Correspondence. Being Vol. i. of the Library of Christian Biography, superintended by the Rev. Robert Bickersteth. Seeley, Jackson & Co.

Digitized by Google

"The men of Argos and Tiryntha next,
And of Hermione, that stands retired
With Asine, within her spacious bay;
Of Epidaurus, crowned with purple vines,
And of Trœzene, with the Achaian youth
Of sea-begirt Ægina, and with thine,
Maseta, and the dwellers on thy coast,
Wave-worn Eïonæ; . . . . . .
And from Caristus and from Styra came
Their warlike multitudes, in front of whom
Elphenor marched, Calchodon's mighty son.
With foreheads shorn and wavy locks behind,
They followed, and alike were eager all
To split the hauberk with the shortened spear." *

But they are dead. "'So am not I,' said the foolish fat scullion." † We are the English of the present day: we have cows and calves, corn and cotton; we hate the Russians; we know where the Crimea is; we believe in Manchester the great. A large expanse is around us: a fertile land of corn and orchards and pleasant hedge-rows and rising trees and noble prospects and large black woods and old church towers. The din of great cities comes mellowed from afar. The green fields, the half-hidden hamlets, the gentle leaves soothe us "with a soft inland murmur." ‡ We have before us a vast seat of interest and toil and beauty and power, and this our own. Here is our home. The use of foreign literature is like the use of foreign travel, — it imprints in early and susceptible years a deep impression of great and strange and noble objects; but we cannot live with these. They do not resemble our familiar life; they do not bind themselves to our intimate affection; they are picturesque and striking, like strangers and wayfarers, but they are not of our home, or homely; they cannot speak to our "business

* "Iliad," Book ii., Cowper's translation, revised by Southey.
† "Tristram Shandy," Book iv., Chap. vii.
‡ Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey."

Digitized by Google

and bosoms";* they cannot touch the hearth of the soul. It would be better to have no outlandish literature in the mind than to have it the principal thing: we should be like accomplished vagabonds without a country, like men with a hundred acquaintances and no friends. We need an intellectual possession analogous to our own life, — which reflects, embodies, improves it; on which we can repose; which will recur to us in the placid moments — which will be a latent principle even in the acute crises — of our life. Let us be thankful if our researches in foreign literature enable us, as rightly used they will enable us, better to comprehend our own. Let us venerate what is old, and marvel at what is far; let us read our own books, let us understand ourselves.

With these principles (if such they may be called) in our minds, we gladly devote these early pages of our journal† to the new edition of Cowper, with which Mr. Bell has favored us. There is no writer more exclusively English; there is no one — or hardly one, perhaps — whose excellences are more natural to our soil, and seem so little able to bear transplantation. We do not remember to have seen his name in any Continental book. Professed histories of English literature, we dare say, name him; but we cannot recall any such familiar and cursory mention as would evince a real knowledge and hearty appreciation of his writings.

The edition itself is a good one. The life of Cowper which is prefixed to it, though not striking, is sensible. The notes are clear, explanatory, and — so far as we know — accurate. The special introductions to each of the poems are short and judicious, and bring to the mind at the proper moment the passages in Cowper's letters most clearly relating to the work in hand. The typography is not very elegant, but it

* Bacon, Dedication to Essays.

† This was the second article in the first number of the *National Review*.

Digitized by Google

is plain and business-like: there is no affectation of cheap ornament.

The little book which stands second on our list belongs to a class of narratives written for a peculiar public, inculcating peculiar doctrines, and adapted (at least in part) to a peculiar taste. We dissent from many of these tenets, and believe that they derive no support, but rather the contrary, from the life of Cowper. In previous publications, written for the same persons, these opinions have been applied to that melancholy story in a manner which it requires strong writing to describe; in this little volume they are more rarely expressed, and when they are, it is with diffidence, tact, and judgment.

Only a most pedantic critic would attempt to separate the criticism on Cowper's works from a narrative of his life; indeed, such an attempt would be scarcely intelligible. Cowper's poems are almost as much connected with his personal circumstances as his letters, and his letters are as purely autobiographical as those of any man can be. If all information concerning him had perished save what his poems contain, the attention of critics would be diverted from the examination of their interior characteristics to a conjectural dissertation on the personal fortunes of the author. The Germans would have much to say. It would be debated in Tübingen who were the Three Hares, why "The Sofa" was written, why John Gilpin was not called William. Halle would show with great clearness that there was no reason why he *should* be called William; that it appeared by the bills of mortality that several other persons born about the same period had also been called John: and the ablest of all the professors would finish the subject with a monograph showing that there was a special fitness in the name John, and that any one with the æsthetic sense, who (like the professor) had devoted many years exclusively to the perusal of the poem, would be certain that any

Digitized by Google

other name would be quite "paralogistic, and in every manner impossible and inappropriate." It would take a German to write upon the Hares.

William Cowper, the poet, was born on Nov. 26, 1731, at his father's parsonage at Berkhampstead. Of his father, who was chaplain to the king, we know nothing of importance. Of his mother, who had been named Donne, and was a Norfolk lady, he has often made mention; and it appears that he regarded the faint recollection which he retained of her — for she died early — with peculiar tenderness. In later life, and when his sun was going down in gloom and sorrow, he recurred eagerly to opportunities of intimacy with her most distant relatives, and wished to keep alive the idea of her in his mind. That idea was not of course very definite, — indeed, as described in his poems, it is rather the abstract idea of what a mother should be than anything else; but he was able to recognize her picture, and there is a suggestion of cakes and sugar-plums which gives a life and vividness to the rest. Soon after her death he was sent to a school kept by a man named Pitman, at which he always described himself as having suffered exceedingly from the cruelty of one of the boys, — he could never see him or think of him, he has told us, without trembling; and there must have been some solid reason for this terror, since — even in those days, when τύπτω meant "I strike," and "boy" denoted a thing to be beaten — this juvenile inflicter of secret stripes was actually expelled. From Mr. Pitman, Cowper, on account of a weakness in the eyes which remained with him through life, was transferred to the care of an oculist, — a dreadful fate even for the most cheerful boy, and certainly not likely to cure one with any disposition to melancholy; hardly indeed can the boldest mind, in its toughest hour of manly fortitude, endure to be domesticated with an operation chair. Thence he went to Westminster, of which he has left us

Digitized by Google

discrepant notices, according to the feeling for the time being uppermost in his mind. From several parts of the "Tirocinium," it would certainly seem that he regarded the whole system of public-school teaching not only with speculative disapproval, but with the painful hatred of a painful experience. A thousand genial passages in his private letters, however, really prove the contrary; and in a changing mood of mind, the very poem which was expressly written to "recommend private tuition at home" gives some idea of school happiness.

> "Be it a weakness, it deserves some praise, —
> We love the play-place of our early days:
> The scene is touching, and the heart is stone
> That feels not at that sight, and feels at none.
> The wall on which we tried our graving skill,
> The very name we carved subsisting still;
> The bench on which we sat while deep employed,
> Though mangled, hacked, and hewed, not yet destroyed;
> The little ones, unbuttoned, glowing hot,
> Playing our games, and on the very spot, —
> As happy as we once to kneel and draw
> The chalky ring, and knuckle down at taw,
> To pitch the ball into the grounded hat
> Or drive it devious with a dexterous pat:
> The pleasing spectacle at once excites
> Such recollection of our own delights,
> That viewing it, we seem almost to obtain
> Our innocent sweet simple years again.
> This fond attachment to the well-known place
> Whence first we started into life's long race
> Maintains its hold with such unfailing sway,
> We feel it e'en in age, and at our latest day."

Probably we pursue an insoluble problem in seeking a suitable education for a morbidly melancholy mind. At first it seems a dreadful thing to place a gentle and sensitive nature in contact, in familiarity [with], and even under the rule of, coarse and strong buoyant natures. Nor should this be in general attempted: the certain result is present suffering,

Digitized by Google

and the expected good is remote and disputable. Nevertheless, it is no artificial difficulty which we here encounter, none which we can hope by educational contrivances to meet or vanquish; the difficulty is in truth the existence of the world. It is the fact, that by the constitution of society the bold, the vigorous, and the buoyant rise and rule; and that the weak, the shrinking, and the timid fall and serve. In after life, in the actual commerce of men, even too in those quiet and tranquil pursuits in which a still and gentle mind should seem to be under the least disadvantage, — in philosophy and speculation, — the strong and active, who have confidence in themselves and their ideas, acquire and keep dominion. It is idle to expect that this will not give great pain; that the shrinking and timid, who are often just as ambitious as others, will not repine; that the rough and strong will not often consciously inflict grievous oppression, — will not still more often, without knowing it, cause to more tremulous minds a refined suffering which their coarser texture could never experience, which it does not sympathize with nor comprehend. Some time in life — it is but a question of a very few years at most — this trial must be undergone. There may be a short time, more or less, of gentle protection and affectionate care; but the leveret grows old, the world waits at the gate, the hounds are ready and the huntsman too, and there is need of strength and pluck and speed. Cowper indeed himself, as we have remarked, does not, on an attentive examination, seem to have suffered exceedingly. In subsequent years, when a dark cloud had passed over him, he was apt at times to exaggerate isolated days of melancholy and pain, and fancy that the dislike which he entertained for the system of schools by way of speculative principle was in fact the result of a personal and suffering experience. But as we shall have (though we shall not in fact perhaps use them all) a thousand occasions

Digitized by Google

to observe, he had, side by side with a morbid and melancholy humor, an easy nature, which was easily satisfied with the world as he found it, was pleased with the gayety of others, and liked the sight of and sympathy with the more active enjoyments which he did not care to engage in or to share. Besides, there is every evidence that cricket and marbles (though he sometimes in his narratives suppresses the fact, in condescension to those of his associates who believed them to be the idols of wood and stone which are spoken of in the prophets) really exercised a laudable and healthy supremacy over his mind. The animation of the scene — the gay alertness which Gray looked back on so fondly in long years of soothing and delicate musing — exerted, as the passage which we cited shows, a great influence over a genius superior to Gray's in facility and freedom, though inferior in the "little footsteps"* of the finest fancy, in the rare and carefully hoarded felicities unequaled save in the immeasurable abundance of the greatest writers. Of course Cowper was unhappy at school, as he was unhappy always; and of course too we are speaking of Westminster only, — for Mr. Pitman and the oculist there is nothing to say.

In scholarship Cowper seems to have succeeded. He was not indeed at all the sort of man to attain to that bold, strong-brained, confident scholarship which Bentley carried to such an extreme, and which, in almost every generation since, some Englishman has been found of hard head and stiff-clayed memory to keep up and perpetuate: his friend Thurlow was the man for this pursuit, and the man to prolong the just notion that those who attain early proficiency in it are likely men to become Lord Chancellors.

* "There scattered oft, the earliest of the year,
By hands unseen are showers of violets found;
The redbreast loves to build and warble there,
And little footsteps lightly print the ground."
— Verse in Gray's "Elegy," canceled by him.

Digitized by Google

Cowper's scholarship was simply the general and delicate *impression* which the early study of the classics invariably leaves on a nice and susceptible mind. In point of information it was strictly of a common nature: it is clear that his real knowledge was mostly confined to the poets, especially the ordinary Latin poets and Homer, and that he never bestowed any regular attention on the historians or orators or philosophers of antiquity, either at school or in after years. Nor indeed would such a course of study have in reality been very beneficial to him: the strong, analytic, comprehensive, reason-giving powers which are required in these dry and rational pursuits were utterly foreign to his mind. All that was congenial to him he acquired in the easy intervals of apparent idleness. The friends whom he made at Westminster, and who continued for many years to be attached to him, preserved the probable tradition that he was a gentle and gradual rather than a forcible or rigorous learner.

The last hundred years have doubtless seen a vast change in the common education of the common boy. The small and pomivorous animal which we so call is now subjected to a treatment very elaborate and careful, that contrasts much with the simple alternation of classics and cuffs which was formerly so fashionable. But it may be doubted whether, for a peculiar mind such as Cowper's, on the intellectual side at least, the tolerant and corpuscular theory of the last century was not preferable to the intolerant and never-resting moral influence that has succeeded to it. Some minds learn most when they seem to learn least; a certain placid, unconscious, equable intaking of knowledge suits them, and alone suits them. To succeed in forcing such men to attain great learning is simply impossible; for you cannot put the fawn into the "Land Transport." The only resource is to allow them to acquire gently and casually in their own way; and in that way they will

Digitized by Google

often imbibe, as if by the mere force of existence, much pleasant and well-fancied knowledge.

From Westminster Cowper went at once into a solicitor's office. Of the next few years (he was then about eighteen) we do not know much. His attention to legal pursuits was, according to his own account, not very profound; yet it could not have been wholly contemptible, for his evangelical friend Mr. Newton — who, whatever may be the worth of his religious theories, had certainly a sound rough judgment on topics terrestrial — used in after years to have no mean opinion of the value of his legal counsel. In truth, though nothing could be more out of Cowper's way than abstract and recondite jurisprudence, an easy and sensible mind like his would find a great deal which was very congenial to it in the well-known and perfectly settled maxims which regulate and rule the daily life of common men. No strain of capacity or stress of speculative intellect is necessary for the apprehension of these: a fair and easy mind which is placed within their reach will find it has learnt them, without knowing when or how.

After some years of legal instruction, Cowper chose to be called to the bar, and took chambers in the Temple accordingly. He never, however, even pretended to practice: he passed his time in literary society, in light study, in tranquil negligence. He was intimate with Colman, Lloyd, and other wits of those times. He wrote an essay in the *Connoisseur*, — the kind of composition then most fashionable, especially with such literary gentlemen as were most careful not to be confounded with the professed authors. In a word, he did "nothing," as that word is understood among the vigorous, aspiring, and trenchant part of mankind. Nobody could seem less likely to attain eminence; every one must have agreed that there was no harm in him, and few could have named any particular good which it was likely that he

Digitized by Google

would achieve. In after days he drew up a memoir of his life, in which he speaks of those years with deep self-reproach. It was not indeed the secular indolence of the time which excited his disapproval,— the course of life had not made him more desirous of worldly honors, but less; and nothing could be further from his tone of feeling than regret for not having strenuously striven to attain them. He spoke of those years in the Puritan manner, using words which literally express the grossest kind of active atheism in a vague and vacant way; leaving us to gather from external sources whether they are to be understood in their plain and literal signification, or in that out-of-the-way and technical sense in which they hardly have a meaning. In this case the external evidence is so clear that there is no difficulty: the regrets of Cowper had reference to offenses which the healthy and sober consciences of mankind will not consider to deserve them; a vague, literary, omnitolerant idleness was perhaps their worst feature. He was himself obliged to own that he had always been considered "as one religiously inclined, if not actually religious";* and the applicable testimony, as well as the whole form and nature of his character, forbid us to ascribe to him the slightest act of license or grossness. A reverend biographer has called his life at this time "an unhappy compound of guilt and wretchedness";† but unless the estimable gentleman thinks it sinful to be a barrister and wretched to live in the Temple, it is not easy to make out what he would mean. In point of intellectual cultivation, and with a view to preparing himself for writing his subsequent works, it is not possible he should have spent his time better. He then acquired that easy, familiar knowledge of

* Autobiography.

† The nearest approach I find to this is Rev. T. Grimshawe's "This vortex of misery and ruin." Cheever (Lecture v.) talks about "depths of guilt and misery"; but his book was not published till 1856. — Ed.

Digitized by Google

terrestrial things, the vague and general information of the superficies of all existence,— the acquaintance with life, business, hubbub, and rustling matter of fact,— which seem odd in the recluse of Olney, and enliven so effectually the cucumbers of the "Task." It has been said that at times every man wishes to be a man of the world, and even the most rigid critic must concede it to be nearly essential to a writer on real life and actual manners: if a man has not seen his brother, how can he describe him? As this world calls happiness and blamelessness, it is not easy to fancy a life more happy — at least with more of the common elements of happiness — or more blameless than those years of Cowper. An easy temper, light fancies hardly as yet broken by shades of melancholy brooding, an enjoying habit, rich humor, literary but not pedantic companions, a large scene of life and observation, polished acquaintance and attached friends, — these were his, and what has a light life more? A rough hero Cowper was not and never became; but he was then as ever a quiet and tranquil gentleman. If De Béranger's doctrine were true, "Le bonheur tient au savoir-vivre,"* there were the materials of existence here: what indeed would not De Béranger have made of them?

One not unnatural result or accompaniment of such a life was, that Cowper fell in love. There were in those days two young ladies, cousins of Cowper, residents in London, to one of whom (the Lady Hesketh of after years) he once wrote: — "My dear Cousin, — . . . So much as I love you, I wonder how . . . it has happened I was never in love with you."† No similar providence protected his intimacy with her sister. Theodora Cowper, "one of those cousins with whom he and Thurlow used to giggle and make giggle in Southampton Row,"‡ was a handsome and vigorous

*"Happiness results from good breeding."

†Aug. 9, 1763.

‡Southey, quoting from a letter of Cowper to Lady Hesketh.

Digitized by Google

damsel. "What!" said her father, "what will you do if you marry William Cowper?" meaning, in the true parental spirit, to intrude mere pecuniary ideas. "Do, sir!" she replied, "wash all day, and ride out on the great dog at night!" a spirited combination of domestic industry and exterior excitement. It is doubtful, however, whether either of these species of pastime and occupation would have been exactly congenial to Cowper. A gentle and refined indolence must have made him an inferior washerman; and perhaps to accompany the canine excursions of a wife "which clear-starched" would have hardly seemed enough to satisfy his accomplished and placid ambition. At any rate, it certainly does seem that he was not a very vigorous lover. The young lady was, as he himself oddly said,—

> "through tedious years of doubt and pain,
> Fixed in her choice and faithful . . . *but in vain.*" *

The poet does indeed partly allude to the parental scruples of Mr. Cowper, her father; but house-rent would not be so high as it is if fathers had their way. The profits of builders are eminently dependent on the uncontrollable nature of the best affections; and that intelligent class of men have had a table compiled from trustworthy data, in which the chances of parental victory are rated at ·0000000001 and those of the young people themselves at ·9999999999—in fact, as many nines as you can imagine. "It has been represented to me," says the actuary, "that few young people ever marry without some objection, more or less slight, on the part of their parents; and from a most laborious calculation, from data collected in quarters both within and exterior to the bills of mortality, I am led to believe that the above figures represent the state of the case accurately enough to form a safe guide for the pecuniary investments

* Scrap of verse quoted by Southey in this connection.

Digitized by Google

of the gentlemen," etc., etc. It is not likely that Theodora Cowper understood decimals; but she had a strong opinion in favor of her cousin, and a great idea, if we rightly read the now obscure annals of old times, that her father's objections might pretty easily have been got over. In fact, we think so even now, without any prejudice of affection, in our cool and mature judgment. Mr. Cowper the aged had nothing to say, except that the parties were cousins: a valuable remark, which has been frequently repeated in similar cases, but which has not been found to prevent a mass of matches both then and since. Probably the old gentleman thought the young gentleman by no means a working man, and objected, believing that a small income can only be made more by unremitting industry; and the young gentleman, admitting this horrid and abstract fact, and agreeing (though perhaps tacitly) in his uncle's estimate of his personal predilections, did not object to being objected to. The nature of Cowper was not indeed passionate. He required beyond almost any man the daily society of amiable and cultivated women; it is clear that he preferred such gentle excitement to the rough and argumentative pleasures of more masculine companionship; his easy and humorous nature loved and learned from female detail: but he had no overwhelming partiality for a particular individual, — one refined lady, the first moments of shyness over, was nearly as pleasing as another refined lady. Disappointment sits easy on such a mind. Perhaps too he feared the anxious duties, the rather contentious tenderness of matrimonial existence. At any rate, he acquiesced. Theodora never married; love did not, however, kill her — at least if it did it was a long time at the task, as she survived these events more than sixty years. She never, seemingly, forgot the past.

But a dark cloud was at hand. If there be any truly painful fact about the world now tolerably well

Digitized by Google

established by ample experience and ample records, it is, that an intellectual and indolent happiness is wholly denied to the children of men. That most valuable author, Lucretius, who has supplied us and others with an inexhaustible supply of metaphors on this topic, ever dwells on the life of his gods with a sad and melancholy feeling that no such life was possible on a crude and cumbersome earth. In general, the two opposing agencies are marriage and [lack of] money; either of these breaks the lot of literary and refined inaction at once and forever. The first of these, as we have seen, Cowper had escaped: his reserved and negligent reveries were still free, at least from the invasion of affection. To this invasion, indeed, there is commonly requisite the acquiescence or connivance of mortality; but all men are born — not free and equal, as the Americans maintain, but, in the Old World at least — basely subjected to the yoke of coin. It is in vain that in this hemisphere we endeavor after impecuniary fancies. In bold and eager youth we go out on our travels: we visit Baalbec and Paphos and Tadmor and Cythera, — ancient shrines and ancient empires, seats of eager love or gentle inspiration; we wander far and long; we have nothing to do with our fellow-men, — what are we, indeed, to diggers and counters? we wander far, we dream to wander forever, — but we dream in vain. A surer force than the subtlest fascination of fancy is in operation: the purse-strings tie us to our kind. Our travel coin runs low, and we must return, away from Tadmor and Baalbec, back to our steady, tedious industry and dull work, to "la vieille Europe" (as Napoleon said), "qui m'ennuie."* It is the same in thought: in vain we seclude ourselves in elegant chambers, in fascinating fancies, in refined reflections. "By this time," says Cowper, "my patrimony being well-nigh spent, and there being no appearance that I should ever repair the damage by

* "Old Europe, which bores me."

Digitized by Google

a fortune of my own getting, I began to be a little apprehensive of approaching want." However little one is fit for it, it is necessary to attack some drudgery. The vigorous and sturdy rouse themselves to the work; they find in its regular occupation, clear decisions, and stern perplexities, a bold and rude compensation for the necessary loss or diminution of light fancies and delicate musings, —

> "Such sights as youthful poets dream,
> On summer eves by haunted stream."*

But it was not so with Cowper: a peculiar and slight nature unfitted him for so rough and harsh a resolution. The lion may eat straw like the ox, and the child put his head on the cockatrice's den; but will even then the light antelope be equal to the heavy plow? will the gentle gazelle, even in those days, pull the slow wagon of ordinary occupation?

The outward position of Cowper was indeed singularly fortunate. Instead of having to meet the long labors of an open profession, or the anxious decisions of a personal business, he had the choice among several lucrative and quiet public offices, in which very ordinary abilities would suffice, and scarcely any degree of incapacity would entail dismissal or reprimand or degradation. It seemed at first scarcely possible that even the least strenuous of men should be found unequal to duties so little arduous or exciting. He has himself said, —

> "Lucrative offices are seldom lost
> For want of powers proportioned to the post;
> Give e'en a dunce the employment he desires,
> And he soon finds the talents it requires:
> A business with an income at its heels
> Furnishes always oil for its own wheels."†

The place he chose was called the "clerkship of the journals of the House of Lords," — one of the many

* Milton, "L'Allegro." † "Retirement."

Digitized by Google

quiet haunts which then slumbered under the imposing shade of parliamentary and aristocratic privilege; yet the idea of it was more than he could bear.

"In the beginning," he writes, "a strong opposition to my friend's right of nomination began to show itself. A powerful party was formed among the Lords to thwart it, in favor of an old enemy to the family, though one much indebted to his bounty; and it appeared plain that if we succeeded at last, it could only be by fighting our ground by inches. Every advantage, I was told, would be sought for, and eagerly seized, to disconcert us. I was bid to expect an examination at the bar of the House, touching my sufficiency for the post I had taken. Being necessarily ignorant of the nature of that business, it became expedient that I should visit the office daily, in order to qualify myself for the strictest scrutiny. All the horror of my fears and perplexities now returned: a thunderbolt would have been as welcome to me as this intelligence. I knew to demonstration that upon these terms the clerkship of the journals was no place for me. To require my attendance at the bar of the House, that I might there publicly entitle myself to the office, was in effect to exclude me from it. In the mean time, the interest of my friend, the causes of his choice, and my own reputation and circumstances, all urged me forward, all pressed me to undertake that which I saw to be impracticable. They whose spirits are formed like mine, to whom *a public exhibition of themselves, on any occasion, is mortal poison*, may have some idea of the horror of my situation; others can have none.

"My continual misery at length brought on a nervous fever; quiet forsook me by day, and peace by night; a finger raised against me was more than I could stand against. In this posture of mind I attended regularly at the office; where, instead of a soul upon the rack, the most active spirits were essentially necessary to my purpose. I expected no assistance from any one there, all the inferior clerks being under the influence of my opponent; accordingly I received none. The journal books were indeed thrown open to me,—a thing which could not be refused, and from which perhaps a man in health, and with a head turned to business, might have gained all the information he wanted; but it was not so with me: I read without perception, and was so distressed that had every clerk in the office been my friend, it could have availed me little; for I was not in a condition to receive instruction, much less to elicit it out of manuscripts without direction. Many months went over

Digitized by Google

me thus employed; constant in the use of means despairing as to the issue."

As the time of trial drew near, his excitement rapidly increased. A short excursion into the country was attended with momentary benefit; but as soon as he returned to town he became immediately unfit for occupation, and as unsettled as ever. He grew first to wish to become mad, next to believe that he should become so, and only to be afraid that the expected delirium might not come on soon enough to prevent his appearance for examination before the Lords, — a fear, the bare existence of which shows how slight a barrier remained between him and the insanity which he fancied that he longed for. He then began to contemplate suicide, and not unnaturally called to mind a curious circumstance.

"I well recollect, too," he writes, "that when I was about eleven years of age, my father desired me to read a vindication of self-murder and give him my sentiments upon the question: I did so, and argued against it. My father heard my reasons, and was silent, neither approving nor disapproving; from whence I inferred that he sided with the author against me, — though all the time, I believe the true motive for his conduct was, that he wanted if he could to think favorably of the state of a departed friend, who had some years before destroyed himself, and whose death had struck him with the deepest affliction. But this solution of the matter never once occurred to me, and the circumstance now weighed mightily with me."

And he made several attempts to execute his purpose, all which are related in a "Narrative" which he drew up after his recovery, and of which the elaborate detail shows a strange and most painful tendency to revive the slightest circumstances of delusions which it would have been most safe and most wholesome never to recall. The curiously careful style, indeed, of the narration, as elegant as that of the most flowing and felicitous letter, reminds one of nothing so much as the studiously beautiful

Digitized by Google

and compact handwriting in which Rousseau used to narrate and describe the most incoherent and indefinite of his personal delusions. On the whole, nevertheless,—for a long time, at least,—it does not seem that the life of Cowper was in real danger. The hesitation and indeterminateness of nerve which rendered him liable to these fancies, and unequal to ordinary action, also prevented his carrying out these terrible visitations to their rigorous and fearful consequences. At last, however, there seems to have been possible if not actual danger.

"Not one hesitating thought now remained, but I fell greedily to the execution of my purpose. My garter was made of a broad scarlet binding, with a sliding buckle, being sewn together at the end; by the help of the buckle I made a noose, and fixed it about my neck, straining it so tight that I hardly left a passage for my breath or for the blood to circulate,—the tongue of the buckle held it fast. At each corner of the bed was placed a wreath of carved work, fastened by an iron pin, which passed up through the midst of it; the other part of the garter, which made a loop, I slipped over one of these, and hung by it some seconds, drawing up my feet under me, that they might not touch the floor: but the iron bent, and the carved work slipped off and the garter with it. I then fastened it to the frame of the tester, winding it round and tying it in a strong knot; the frame broke short, and let me down again.

"The third effort was more likely to succeed. I set the door open, which reached within a foot of the ceiling, and by the help of a chair I could command the top of it; and the loop, being large enough to admit a large angle of the door, was easily fixed so as not to slip off again. I pushed away the chair with my feet, and hung at my whole length. While I hung there, I distinctly heard a voice say three times, "*'Tis over!*" Though I am sure of the fact, and was so at the time, yet it did not at all alarm me, or affect my resolution. I hung so long that I lost all sense, all consciousness of existence.

"When I came to myself again, I thought myself in hell; the sound of my own dreadful groans was all that I heard, and a feeling like that produced by a flash of lightning just beginning to seize upon me passed over my whole body. In a few seconds I found myself fallen with my face to the floor. In about half a

Digitized by Google

minute I recovered my feet; and reeling and staggering, stumbled into bed again.

"By the blessed providence of God, the garter which had held me till the bitterness of temporal death was past, broke just before eternal death had taken place upon me. The stagnation of the blood under one eye in a broad crimson spot, and a red circle about my neck, showed plainly that I had been on the brink of eternity. The latter indeed might have been occasioned by the pressure of the garter; but the former was certainly the effect of strangulation, for it was not attended with the sensation of a bruise, as it must have been had I in my fall received one in so tender a part. And I rather think the circle round my neck was owing to the same cause; for the part was not excoriated, nor at all in pain.

"Soon after I got into bed, I was surprised to hear a noise in the dining-room, where the laundress was lighting a fire: she had found the door unbolted, notwithstanding my design to fasten it, and must have passed the bedchamber door while I was hanging on it, and yet never perceived me. She heard me fall, and presently came to ask if I was well; adding, she feared I had been in a fit.

"I sent her to a friend, to whom I related the whole affair, and dispatched him to my kinsman at the coffee-house. As soon as the latter arrived, I pointed to the broken garter which lay in the middle of the room, and apprised him also of the attempt I had been making. His words were, 'My dear Mr. Cowper, you terrify me! To be sure you cannot hold the office at this rate, — where is the deputation?' I gave him the key of the drawer where it was deposited, and his business requiring his immediate attendance, he took it away with him; and thus ended all my connection with the Parliament House."*

It must have been a strange scene; for so far as appears, the outward manners of Cowper had undergone no remarkable change. There was always a

*The text of the "Autobiography" forms a curious little bibliographical puzzle. Cowper must have made several copies for various friends. He died in 1800, and in 1816 a London house printed it for the first time. The following year another house issued it, evidently from another copy, as the text of the two varies quite a little in spots. Southey's memoir was published in 1837, and in it he incorporated about as much of the "Autobiography" as Bagehot does; but as his text does not conform to either of the printed ones, I suppose he used a third MS. copy. Bagehot's text, characteristically, does not agree with any of them, and is in fact a *mélange* of Southey and the first edition; but as most of it is taken from the latter, I have conformed the text to that, retaining Bagehot's (which is Southey's) paragraphing. — Ed.

Digitized by Google

mild composure about them which would have deceived any but the most experienced observer; and it is probable that Major Cowper, his "kinsman" and intimate friend, had very little or no suspicion of the conflict which was raging beneath his tranquil and accomplished exterior. What a contrast is the "broad scarlet binding" and the red circle, showing "plainly that I had been on the brink of eternity," to the daily life of the easy gentleman "who contributed some essays to the *St. James's Magazine* and more than one to the *St. James's Chronicle*," living "soft years" on a smooth superficies of existence, away from the dark realities which are as it were the skeleton of our life, which seem to haunt us like a death's-head throughout the narrative that has been quoted!

It was doubtless the notion of Cowper's friends that when all idea of an examination before the Lords was removed, by the abandonment of his nomination to the office in question, the excitement which that idea had called forth would very soon pass away; but that notion was an error, — a far more complicated state of mind ensued. If we may advance a theory on a most difficult as well as painful topic, we would say that religion is very rarely the proximate or impulsive cause of madness. The real and ultimate cause (as we speak) is of course that unknown something which we variously call "predisposition" or "malady" or "defect"; but the critical and exciting cause seems generally to be some comparatively trivial external occasion which falls within the necessary lot and life of the person who becomes mad. The inherent excitability is usually awakened by some petty casual stimulant which looks positively not worth a thought, — certainly a terribly slight agent for the wreck and havoc which it makes. The constitution of the human mind is such that the great general questions, problems, and difficulties of our state of being are not commonly

Digitized by Google

capable of producing that result: they appear to lie too far in the distance, to require too great a stretch of imagination, to be too apt (for the very weakness of our minds' sake, perhaps) to be thrust out of view by the trivial occurrences of this desultory world,— to be too impersonal, in truth, to cause the exclusive, anxious, aching occupation which is the common prelude and occasion of insanity. Afterwards, on the other hand, when the wound is once struck, when the petty circumstance has been allowed to work its awful consequence, religion very frequently becomes the predominating topic of delusion. It would seem as if, when the mind was once set apart by the natural consequences of the disease, and secluded from the usual occupations of and customary contact with other minds, it searched about through all the universe for causes of trouble and anguish. A certain pain probably exists; and even in insanity, man is so far a rational being that he seeks and craves at least the outside and semblance of a reason for a suffering which is really and truly without reason. Something must be found to justify its anguish to itself; and naturally the great difficulties inherent in the very position of man in this world, and trying so deeply the faith and firmness of the wariest and wisest minds, are ever ready to present plausible justifications of causeless depression. An anxious melancholy is not without very perplexing sophisms and very painful illustrations, with which a morbid mind can obtain not only a fair logical position, but even apparent argumentative victories, on many points, over the more hardy part of mankind: the acuteness of madness soon uses these in its own wretched and terrible justification. No originality of mind is necessary for so doing: great and terrible systems of divinity and philosophy lie round about us, which if true might drive a wise man mad,— which read like professed exculpations of a contemplated insanity.

Digitized by Google

"To this moment," writes Cowper, immediately after the passage which has been quoted, "I had felt no concern of a spiritual kind;" but now a conviction fell upon him that he was eternally lost. "All my worldly sorrows," he says, "seemed now as though they had never been, the terrors of my mind which succeeded them seemed so great and so much more afflicting. One moment I thought myself shut out from mercy by one chapter, and the next by another." He thought the curse of the barren fig-tree was pronounced with an especial and designed reference to him. All day long these thoughts followed him. He lived nearly alone, and his friends were either unaware of the extreme degree to which his mind was excited, or unalive to the possible alleviation with which new scenes and cheerful society might have been attended. He fancied the people in the street stared at and despised him; that ballads were made in ridicule of him; that the voice of his conscience was eternally audible. He then bethought him of a Mr. Madan, an evangelical minister, at that time held in much estimation, but who afterwards fell into disrepute by the publication of a work on marriage and its obligations (or rather its *non*-obligations) which Cowper has commented on in a controversial poem. That gentleman visited Cowper at his request, and began to explain to him the gospel.

"He spoke," says Cowper, "of original sin, and the corruption of every man born into the world, whereby every one is a child of wrath. I perceived something like hope dawn in my heart. This doctrine set me more upon a level with the rest of mankind, and made my condition appear less desperate.

"Next he insisted on the all-atoning efficacy of the blood of Jesus, and his righteousness, for our justification. While I heard this part of his discourse, and the Scriptures on which he founded it, my heart begun to burn within me; my soul was pierced with a sense of my bitter ingratitude to so merciful a Saviour; and those tears which I thought impossible burst forth freely. I saw clearly that my case required such a remedy, and had not the least doubt within me but that this was the gospel of salvation.

Digitized by Google

"Lastly he urged the necessity of a lively faith in Jesus Christ; not an assent only of the understanding, but a faith of application, an actual laying hold of it and embracing it as a salvation wrought out for me personally. Here I failed, and deplored my want of such a faith. He told me it was the gift of God, which he trusted He would bestow upon me. I could only reply, 'I wish he would:' a very irreverent petition, but a very sincere one, and such as the blessed God in his due time was pleased to answer."

It does not appear that previous to this conversation he had ever distinctly realized the tenets which were afterwards to have so much influence over him. For the moment they produced a good effect, but in a few hours their novelty was over; the dark hour returned, and he awoke from slumber with "a stronger alienation from God than ever." The tenacity with which the mind in moments of excitement appropriates and retains very abstract tenets that bear even in a slight degree on the topic of its excitement, is as remarkable as the facility and accuracy with which it apprehends them in the midst of so great a tumult. Many changes and many years rolled over Cowper, — years of black and dark depression, years of tranquil society, of genial labor, of literary fame; but never in the lightest or darkest hour was he wholly unconscious of the abstract creed of Martin Madan. At the time, indeed, the body had its rights and maintained them: —

"While I traversed the apartment, in the most horrible dismay of soul, expecting every moment that the earth would open and swallow me up, — my conscience scaring me, the avenger of blood pursuing me, and the city of refuge out of reach and out of sight, — a strange and horrible darkness fell upon me. If it were possible that a heavy blow could light on the brain without touching the skull, such was the sensation I felt. I clapped my hand to my forehead, and cried aloud, through the pain it gave me. At every stroke my thoughts and expressions became more wild and incoherent: all that remained clear was the sense of sin and the expectation of punishment, — these kept undisturbed possession all through my illness, without interruption or abatement."

Digitized by Google

It is idle to follow details further. The deep waters had passed over him, and it was long before the face of his mind was dry or green again.

He was placed in a lunatic asylum, where he continued many months, and which he left apparently cured. After some changes of no moment, but which by his own account evinced many traces of dangerous excitement, he took up his abode at Huntingdon, with the family of Unwin; and it is remarkable how soon the taste for easy and simple yet not wholly unintellectual society, which had formerly characterized him, revived again. The delineation cannot be given in any terms but his own:—

"We breakfast commonly between eight and nine; till eleven we read either the Scripture or the sermons of some faithful preacher of those holy mysteries; at eleven we attend divine service, which is performed here twice every day; and from twelve to three we separate, and amuse ourselves as we please. During that interval, I either read in my own apartment, or walk, or ride, or work in the garden. We seldom sit an hour after dinner, but if the weather permits, adjourn to the garden, where with Mrs. Unwin and her son I have generally the pleasure of religious conversation till tea-time. If it rains, or is too windy for walking we either converse within doors, or sing some hymns of Martin's collection, and by the help of Mrs. Unwin's harpsichord make up a tolerable concert, in which our hearts, I hope, are the best and most musical performers. After tea we sally forth to walk in good earnest. Mrs. Unwin is a good walker, and we have generally traveled about four miles before we see home again. When the days are short, we make this excursion in the former part of the day, between church time and dinner. At night we read and converse as before till supper, and commonly finish the evening either with hymns or a sermon, and last of all the family are called to prayers. I need not tell *you* that such a life as this is consistent with the utmost cheerfulness; accordingly we are all happy, and dwell together in unity as brethren. Mrs. Unwin has almost a maternal affection for me, and I have something very like a filial one for her, and her son and I are brothers. Blessed be the God of our salvation for such companions, and for such a life,—above all, for a heart to like it."*

* Letter to Mrs. Cowper, Oct. 20, 1766.

Digitized by Google

The scene was not, however, to last as it was. Mr. Unwin, the husband of Mrs. Unwin, was suddenly killed soon after, and Cowper removed with Mrs. Unwin to Olney, where a new epoch of his life begins.

The curate of Olney at this time was John Newton: a man of great energy of mind, and well known in his generation for several vigorous books and still more for a very remarkable life. He had been captain of a Liverpool slave-ship, an occupation in which he had quite energy enough to have succeeded; but was deeply influenced by serious motives, and became one of the strongest and most active of the Low Church clergymen of that day. He was one of those men who seem intended to make excellence disagreeable. He was a converting engine: the whole of his own enormous vigor of body, the whole steady intensity of a pushing, impelling, compelling, unoriginal mind, all the mental or corporeal exertion he could exact from the weak or elicit from the strong,—were devoted to one sole purpose, the effectual impact of the Calvinistic tenets on the parishioners of Olney. Nor would we hint that his exertions were at all useless: there is no denying that there is a certain stiff, tough, agricultural, clayish English nature, on which the aggressive divine produces a visible and good effect; the hardest and heaviest hammering seems required to stir and warm that close and coarse matter. To impress any sense of the supernatural on so secular a substance is a great good, though that sense be expressed in false or irritating theories. It is unpleasant, no doubt, to hear the hammering; the bystanders are in an evil case: you might as well live near an iron-ship yard. Still, the blows do not hurt the iron: something of the sort is necessary to beat the coarse ore into a shining and useful shape; certainly that does so beat it. But the case is different when the hundred-handed divine desires to hit others: the very system

Digitized by Google

which on account of its hard blows is adapted to the tough and ungentle, is by that very reason unfit for the tremulous and tender; the nature of many men and many women is such that it will not bear the daily and incessant repetition of some certain and indisputable truths. The universe has of course its dark aspect; many tremendous facts and difficulties can be found, which often haunt the timid and sometimes incapacitate the feeble: to be continually insisting on these, and these only, will simply render both more and more unfit for the duties to which they were born. And if this is the case with certain fact and clear truth, how much more with uncertain error and mystic exaggeration! Mr. Newton was alive to the consequence of his system: — "I believe my name is up about the country for preaching people mad; for whether it is owing to the sedentary life the women lead here, . . . I suppose we have near a dozen in different degrees disordered in their heads, and most of them, I believe, *truly gracious people.*"* He perhaps found his peculiar views more generally appreciated among this class of young ladies than among more healthy and rational people; and clearly did not wholly condemn the delivering them, even at this cost, from the tyranny of the "carnal reason."

No more dangerous adviser, if this world had been searched over, could have been found for Cowper. What the latter required was prompt encouragement to cheerful occupation, quiet amusement, gentle and unexhausting society. Mr. Newton thought otherwise. His favorite motto was, *Perimus in licitis*;† the simple round of daily pleasures and genial employments which give instinctive happiness to the happiest natures, and best cheer the common life of common men, was studiously watched and scrutinized with the energy of a Puritan and the

* Letter to Thornton, in Southey, near close of Chap. viii.

† "We perish among pleasures."

Digitized by Google

watchfulness of an inquisitor. Mr. Newton had all the tastes and habits which go to form what in the Catholic system is called a "spiritual director." Of late years it is well known that the institution (or rather practice) of confession has expanded into a more potent and more imperious organization: you are expected by the priests of the Roman Church not only to confess to them what you have done, but to take their advice as to what you shall do; the future is under their direction, as the past was beneath their scrutiny. This was exactly the view which Mr. Newton took of his relation to Cowper. A natural aptitude for dictation, a steady, strong, compelling decision, great self-command, and a sharp perception of all impressible points in the characters of others, made the task of guiding "weaker brethren" a natural and pleasant pursuit. To suppose a shrinking, a wounded, and [a] tremulous mind, like that of Cowper's, would rise against such bold dogmatism, such hard volition, such animal nerve, is to fancy that the beaten slave will dare the lash which his very eyes instinctively fear and shun. Mr. Newton's great idea was that Cowper ought to be of some use: there was a great deal of excellent hammering hammered in the parish, and it was sinful that a man with nothing to do should sit tranquil. Several persons in the street had done what they ought not; foot-ball was not unknown; cards were played; flirtation was not conducted "improvingly": it was clearly Cowper's duty to put a stop to such things. Accordingly he made him a parochial implement: he set him to visit painful cases, to attend at prayer meetings, to compose melancholy hymns, even to conduct or share in conducting public services himself. It never seems to have occurred to him that so fragile a mind would be unequal to the burden, — that a bruised reed does often break; or rather, if it did occur to him, he regarded it as a subterranean suggestion, and expected a supernatural interference to

Digitized by Google

counteract the events at which it hinted. Yet there are certain rules and principles in this world which seem earthly, but which the most excellent may not on that account venture to disregard. The consequence of placing Cowper in exciting situations was a return of his excitement. It is painful to observe that though the attack resembled in all its main features his former one, several months passed before Mr. Newton would permit any proper physical remedies to be applied, and then it was too late. We need not again recount details: many months of dark despondency were to be passed before he returned to a simple and rational mind.

The truth is, that independently of the personal activity and dauntless energy which made Mr. Newton so little likely to sympathize with such a mind as Cowper's, the former lay under a still more dangerous disqualification for Cowper's predominant adviser; viz., an erroneous view of his case. His opinion exactly coincided with that which Cowper first heard from Mr. Madan during his first illness in London. This view is, in substance, that the depression which Cowper originally suffered from was exactly what almost all mankind, if they had been rightly aware of their true condition, would have suffered also. They were "children of wrath," just as he was; and the only difference between them was, that he appreciated his state and they did not,—showing in fact that Cowper was not, as common persons imagined, on the extreme verge of insanity, but on the contrary a particularly rational and right-seeing man.* So far, Cowper says, with one of the painful smiles which make his "Narrative" so melancholy, "my condition was less desperate;" that is, his counselors had persuaded him that his malady was rational, and his sufferings befitting his true position,—no difficult task, for they had the

*The same nonsense, set off with much virulent sarcasm, is the entire burden and *raison d'être* of Dr. Cheever's Lectures on Cowper.—ED.

Digitized by Google

poignancy of pain and the pertinacity of madness on their side. The efficacy of their arguments was less when they endeavored to make known the sources of consolation. We have seen the immediate effect of the first exposition of the evangelical theory of faith. When applied to the case of the morbidly despairing sinner, that theory has one argumentative imperfection which the logical sharpness of madness will soon discover and point out. The simple reply is, "I do not feel the faith which you describe. I wish I could feel it; but it is no use trying to conceal the fact, I am conscious of nothing like it." And this was substantially Cowper's reply on his first interview with Mr. Madan; it was a simple denial of a fact solely accessible to his personal consciousness, and as such unanswerable: and in this intellectual position (if such it can be called) his mind long rested. At the commencement of his residence at Olney, however, there was a decided change. Whether it were that he mistook the glow of physical recovery for the peace of spiritual renovation, or that some subtler and deeper agency was, as he supposed, at work, the outward sign is certain; and there is no question but that during the first months of his residence at Olney, and his daily intercourse with Mr. Newton, he did feel or supposed himself to feel the faith which he was instructed to deem desirable, and he lent himself with natural pleasure to the diffusion of it among those around him. But this theory of salvation requires a metaphysical postulate which to many minds is simply impossible. A prolonged meditation on unseen realities is sufficiently difficult, and seems scarcely the occupation for which common human nature was intended; but more than this is said to be essential, — the meditation must be successful in exciting certain feelings of a kind peculiarly delicate, subtle, and (so to speak) unstable. "The wind bloweth where it listeth;"* but it is scarcely

* John iii. 8.

Digitized by Google

more partial, more quick, more unaccountable, than the glow of an emotion excited by a supernatural and unseen object: this depends on the vigor of imagination which has to conceive that object, on the vivacity of feeling which has to be quickened by it, on the physical energy which has to support it; the very watchfulness, the scrupulous anxiety to find and retain the feeling are exactly the most unfavorable to it. In a delicate disposition like that of Cowper, such feelings revolt from the inquisition of others and shrink from the stare of the mind itself. But even this was not the worst: the mind of Cowper was, so to speak, naturally terrestrial. If a man wishes for a nice appreciation of the details of time and sense, let him consult Cowper's miscellaneous letters. Each simple event of every day, each petty object of external observation or inward suggestion, is there chronicled with a fine and female fondness, — a wise and happy faculty, let us say, of deriving a gentle happiness from the tranquil and passing hour. The fortunes of the hares, — Bess who died young, and Tiney who lived to be nine years old; the miller who engaged their affections at once, his powdered coat having charms that were irresistible; the knitting-needles of Mrs. Unwin; the qualities of his friend Hill, who managed his money transactions, —

> "An honest man, close buttoned to the chin,
> Broadcloth without, and a warm heart within,"—

live in his pages, and were the natural, insensible, unbiased occupants of his fancy. It is easy for a firm and hard mind to despise the minutiæ of life, and to pore and brood over an abstract proposition; it may be possible for the highest, the strongest, the most arduous imagination to live aloof from common things, alone with the unseen world, as some live their whole lives in memory with a world which has passed away: but it seems hardly possible that an

Digitized by Google

imagination such as Cowper's — which was rather a detective fancy, perceiving the charm and essence of things which are seen, than an eager, actuating, conceptive power, embodying, enlivening, empowering those which are not seen — should leave its own home, the *domus et tellus*, the sweet fields and rare orchards which it loved, and go out alone, apart from all flesh, into the trackless and fearful and unknown Infinite. Of course his timid mind shrank from it at once, and returned to its own fireside. After a little, the idea that he had a true faith faded away. Mr. Newton, with misdirected zeal, sought to revive it by inciting him to devotional composition; but the only result was the volume of "Olney Hymns,"—a very painful record, of which the burden is,—

"My former hopes are fled,
My terror now begins;
I feel, alas! that I am dead
In trespasses and sins.

"Ah, whither shall I fly?
I hear the thunder roar;
The law proclaims destruction nigh,
And vengeance at the door."

"The Preacher" himself did not conceive such a store of melancholy forebodings.

The truth is, that there are two remarkable species of minds on which the doctrine of Calvinism acts as a deadly and fatal poison.

One is the natural, vigorous, bold, defiant, herolike character, abounding in generosity, in valor, in vigor, and abounding also in self-will and pride and scorn. This is the temperament which supplies the world with ardent hopes and keen fancies, with springing energies and bold plans and noble exploits; but yet, under another aspect and in other times, is equally prompt in desperate deeds, awful machinations, deep and daring crimes. It one day is ready

Digitized by Google

by its innate heroism to deliver the world from any tyranny; the next it "hungers to become a tyrant" in its turn. Yet the words of the poet are ever true and are ever good, as a defense against the cold narrators who mingle its misdeeds and exploits, and profess to believe that each is a set-off and compensation for the other. You can ever say,—

> "Still he retained,
> 'Mid much abasement, what he had received
> From nature,—an intense and glowing mind."*

It is idle to tell such a mind that by an arbitrary, irrespective election it is chosen to happiness or doomed to perdition. The evil and the good in it equally revolt at such terms. It thinks, "Well, if the universe be a tyranny,—if one man is doomed to misery for no fault and the next is chosen to pleasure for no merit, if the favoritism of time be copied into eternity, if the highest heaven be indeed like the meanest earth,—then, as the heathen say, it is better to suffer injustice than to inflict it, better to be the victims of the eternal despotism than its ministers, better to curse in hell than serve in heaven." And the whole burning soul breaks away into what is well called "Satanism,"—into wildness and bitterness and contempt.

Cowper had as little in common with this proud, Titanic, aspiring genius as any man has or can have; but his mind was equally injured by the same system. On a timid, lounging, gentle, acquiescent mind the effect is precisely the contrary,—singularly contrasted, but equally calamitous. "I am doomed, you tell me, already. One way or other the matter is already settled. It can be no better, and it is as bad as it can be. Let me alone; do not trouble me at least these few years. Let me at least sit sadly and bewail myself. Action is useless: I will brood upon my melancholy and be at rest." The soul sinks into

* Wordsworth, "Excursion," Book i.

Digitized by Google

"passionless calm and silence unreproved,"* flinging away "the passionate tumult of a clinging hope"† which is the allotted boon and happiness of mortality. It was, as we believe, straight towards this terrible state that Mr. Newton directed Cowper. He kept him occupied with subjects which were too great for him; he kept him away from his natural life; he presented to him views and opinions but too well justifying his deep and dark insanity; he convinced him that he ought to experience emotions which were foreign to his nature; he had nothing to add by way of comfort when told that those emotions did not and could not exist. Cowper seems to have felt this: his second illness commenced with a strong dislike to his spiritual adviser, and it may be doubted if there ever was again the same cordiality between them. Mr. Newton, too, as was natural, was vexed at Cowper's calamity: his reputation in the "religious world" was deeply pledged to conducting this most "interesting case" to a favorable termination; a failure was not to be contemplated, and yet it was obviously coming and coming. It was to no purpose that Cowper acquired fame and secular glory in the literary world: this was rather adding gall to bitterness. The unbelievers in evangelical religion would be able to point to one at least, and that the best known among its proselytes, to whom it had not brought peace,— whom it had rather confirmed in wretchedness. His literary fame, too, took Cowper away into a larger circle, out of the rigid decrees and narrow ordinances of his father confessor; and of course the latter remonstrated. Altogether there was, not a cessation but a decline and diminution of intercourse. But better, according to the saying, had they "never met or never parted":‡ if a man is to have a father confessor, let him at least choose

*Shelley, "The Sunset."

†Shelley, "Alastor," near the close.

‡Burns, "Fare thee weel, thou best and dearest."

Digitized by Google

a sensible one. The dominion of Mr. Newton had been exercised, not indeed with mildness or wisdom or discrimination, but nevertheless with strong judgment and coarse acumen; with a bad choice of ends, but at least a vigorous selection of means: afterwards it was otherwise. In the village of Olney there was a schoolmaster whose name often occurs in Cowper's letters,—a foolish, vain, worthy sort of man; what the people of the West call a "scholard,"—that is, a man of more knowledge and less sense than those about him. He sometimes came to Cowper to beg old clothes, sometimes to instruct him with literary criticisms; and is known in the "Correspondence" as "Mr. Teedon, who reads the *Monthly Review*," "Mr. Teedon, whose smile is fame."* Yet to this man, whose harmless follies his humor had played with a thousand times, Cowper, in his later years, and when the dominion of Mr. Newton had so far ceased as to leave him after many years the use of his own judgment, resorted for counsel and guidance. And the man had visions and dreams and revelations!! But enough of such matters.

The peculiarity of Cowper's life is, its division into marked periods. From his birth to his first illness he may be said to have lived in one world, and for some twenty years afterwards—from his thirty-second to about his fiftieth year—in a wholly distinct one. Much of the latter time was spent in hopeless despondency. His principal companions during that period were Mr. Newton, about whom we have been writing, and Mrs. Unwin, who may be said to have broken the charmed circle of seclusion in which they lived by inciting Cowper to continuous literary composition. Of Mrs. Unwin herself ample memorials remain. She was in truth a most excellent person: in mind and years much older than the poet,—as it were, by profession elderly: able in every species of preserve, profound in salts and pans

*The second quotation is real, the first imaginary.—Ed.

Digitized by Google

and jellies; culinary by taste; by tact and instinct motherly and housewifish. She was not, however, without some less larderiferous qualities: Lady Hesketh and Lady Austen, neither of them very favorably prejudiced critics, decided so. The former has written:—"She is very far from grave; on the contrary, she is cheerful and gay, and laughs *de bon cœur* upon the smallest provocation. Amidst all the little puritanical words which fall from her *de tems en tems*, she seems to have by nature a great fund of gayety. . . . I must say, too, that she seems to be very well read in the English poets, as appears by several little quotations which she makes from time to time, and has a true taste for what is excellent in that way."* This she showed by persuading Cowper to the composition of his first volume.

As a poet, Cowper belongs (though with some differences) to the school of Pope. Great question, as is well known, has been raised whether that very accomplished writer was a poet at all; and a secondary and equally debated question runs side by side,—whether, if a poet, he were a great one. With the peculiar genius and personal rank of Pope we have in this article nothing to do; but this much may be safely said,—that according to the definition which has been ventured of the poetical art by the greatest and most accomplished master of the other school, his works are delicately finished specimens of artistic excellence in one branch of it. "Poetry," says Shelley, who was surely a good judge, "is the expression of the imagination";† by which he meant of course not only the expression of the interior sensations accompanying the faculty's employment, but likewise, and more emphatically, the exercise of it in the delineation of objects which attract it. Now, society viewed as a whole is clearly one of those objects. There is a vast assemblage of human beings, of all nations, tongues, and languages, each

*Southey, Chap. x. †"Defense of Poetry."

Digitized by Google

with ideas and a personality and a cleaving mark of its own, yet each having somewhat that resembles something of all, much that resembles a part of many; a motley regiment, of various forms, of a million impulses, passions, thoughts, fancies, motives, actions; a "many-headed monster thing;"* a Bashi-Bazouk array; a clown to be laughed at, a hydra to be spoken evil of: yet, in fine, our all,—the very people of the whole earth. There is nothing in nature more attractive to the fancy than this great spectacle and congregation. Since Herodotus went to and fro to the best of his ability over all the earth, the spectacle of civilization has ever drawn to itself the quick eyes and quick tongues of seeing and roving men. Not only, says Goethe, is man ever interesting to man, but properly there is nothing else interesting.† There is a distinct subject for poetry — at least according to Shelley's definition — in selecting and working out, in idealizing, in combining, in purifying, in intensifying the great features and peculiarities which make society as a whole interesting, remarkable, fancy-taking. No doubt it is not the object of poetry to versify the works of the eminent narrators, "to prose," according to a disrespectful description, "o'er books of traveled seamen," to chill you with didactic icebergs, to heat you with torrid sonnets. The difficulty of reading such local narratives is now great; so great that a gentleman in the reviewing department once wished "one man would go everywhere and say everything," in order that the limit of his labor at least might be settled and defined; and it would certainly be much worse if palm-trees were of course to be in rhyme, and the dinner of the migrator only recountable in blank verse. We do not wish this: we only maintain that there

*"Lady of the Lake," Canto vi.

†Not at all. He only says ("Elective Affinities," Chap. viii.) that while other things may be *interesting*, mankind is the proper *study* (*cf.* Pope, "The proper study of mankind is man"). — ED.

Digitized by Google

are certain principles, causes, passions, affections, acting on and influencing communities at large, permeating their life, ruling their principles, directing their history, working as a subtle and wandering principle over all their existence; these have a somewhat abstract character as compared with the soft ideals and passionate incarnations of purely individual character, and seem dull beside the stirring lays of eventful times in which the earlier and bolder poets delight. Another cause co-operates: the tendency of civilization is to pare away the oddness and license of personal character, and to leave a monotonous agreeableness as the sole trait and comfort of mankind. This obviously tends to increase the efficacy of general principles, to bring to view the daily efficacy of constant causes, to suggest the hidden agency of subtle abstractions; accordingly, as civilization augments and philosophy grows, we commonly find a school of common-sense poets, as they may be called, arise and develop, who proceed to depict what they see around them, to describe its *natura naturans*, to delineate its *natura naturata*, to evolve productive agencies, to teach subtle ramifications. Complete, as the most characteristic specimen of this class of poets, stands Pope. He was, some one we think has said, the sort of person we cannot even conceive existing in a barbarous age. His subject was not life at large, but fashionable life. He described the society in which he was thrown, the people among whom he lived; his mind was a hoard of small maxims, a quintessence of petty observations. When he described character, he described it, not dramatically nor as it is in itself, but observantly and from without; calling up in the mind not so much a vivid conception of the man — of the real, corporeal, substantial being — as an idea of the idea which a metaphysical bystander might refine and excruciate concerning him. Society in Pope is scarcely a society of people, but of pretty little atoms, colored and

Digitized by Google

painted with hoops or in coats,—a miniature of metaphysics, a puppet-show of sylphs. He elucidates the doctrine that the tendency of civilized poetry is towards an analytic sketch of the existing civilization. Nor is the effect diminished by the pervading character of keen judgment and minute intrusive sagacity; for no great painter of English life can be without a rough sizing of strong sense, or he would fail from want of sympathy with his subject. Pope exemplifies the class and type of "common-sense" poets who substitute an animated "*catalogue raisonné*" of working thoughts and operative principles—a sketch of the then present society, as a whole and as an object—for the *κλέα ανδρῶν** the tale of which is one subject of early verse, and the stage effect of living, loving, passionate, impetuous men and women which is the special topic of another.

What Pope is to our fashionable and town life, Cowper is to our domestic and rural life; this is perhaps the reason why he is so national. It has been said no foreigner can live in the country: we doubt whether any people who felt their whole heart and [the] entire exclusive breath of their existence to be concentrated in a great capital, could or would appreciate such intensely provincial pictures as are the entire scope of Cowper's delineation. A good many imaginative persons are really plagued with him; everything is so comfortable—the tea-urn hisses so plainly, the toast is so warm, the breakfast so neat, the food so edible—that one turns away in excitble moments a little angrily from anything so quiet, tame, and sober. Have we not always hated this life? What can be worse than regular meals, clock-moving servants, a time for everything and everything then done, a place for everything without the Irish alleviation,—"Sure and I'm rejiced to say, that's jist and exactly where it isn't,"—a common gardener, a slow parson, a heavy assortment of

* "Glories of men."

Digitized by Google

near relations, a placid house flowing with milk and sugar,—all that the fates can stuff together of substantial comfort and fed and fatted monotony? Aspiring and excitable youth stoutly maintains it can endure anything much better than the "gross fog Bœotian,"—the torpid, indoor, tea-tabular felicity. Still, a great deal of tea is really consumed in the English nation. A settled and practical people are distinctly in favor of heavy relaxations, placid prolixities, slow comforts. A state between the mind and the body,—something intermediate, half-way from the newspaper to a nap,—this is what we may call the middle-life theory of the influential English gentleman, the true aspiration of the ruler of the world.

> "'Tis then the understanding takes repose
> In indolent vacuity of thought,
> And sleeps and is refreshed. Meanwhile the face
> Conceals the mood lethargic with a mask
> Of deep deliberation."*

It is these indoor scenes, this common world, this gentle round of "calm delights," the trivial course of slowly moving pleasures, the petty detail of quiet relaxation, that Cowper excels in. The post-boy, the winter's evening, the newspaper, the knitting-needles, the stockings, the wagon,—these are his subjects. His sure popularity arises from his having held up to the English people exact delineations of what they really prefer. Perhaps one person in four hundred understands Wordsworth; about one in eight thousand may appreciate Shelley; but there is no expressing the small fraction who do not love dullness, who do not enter into

> "home-born happiness,
> Fireside enjoyments, intimate delights,
> And all the comforts that the lowly roof
> Of undisturbed retirement and the hours
> Of long uninterrupted evening know."†

*"The Task." †Ibid.

Digitized by Google

His objection to the more exciting and fashionable pleasures was perhaps, in an extreme analysis, that they put him out; they were too great a task for his energies, — asked too much for his spirits. His comments on them rather remind us of Mr. Rushworth's — Miss Austen's heavy hero — remark on the theater: "I think we went on much better by ourselves before this was thought of, doing — doing — doing — *nothing.*"*

The subject of these pictures, in point of interest, may be what we choose to think it; but there is no denying great merit to the execution. The sketches have the highest merit, — suitableness of style. It would be absurd to describe a post-boy as sonneteers their mistress: to cover his plain face with fine similes, to put forward the "brow of Egypt," to stick metaphors upon him as the Americans upon General Washington. The only merit such topics have room for is an easy and dexterous plainness, a sober suit of well-fitting expressions, a free, working, † flowing, picturesque garb of words, adapted to the solid conduct of a sound and serious world; and this merit Cowper's style has. On the other hand, it entirely wants the higher and rarer excellences of poetical expression. There is none of the choice art which has studiously selected the words of one class of great poets, or the rare, untaught, unteachable felicity which has vivified those of others. No one, in reading Cowper, stops as if to draw his breath more deeply over words which do not so much express or clothe poetical ideas, as seem to intertwine, coalesce, and be blended with the very essence of poetry itself.

Of course a poet could not deal in any measure with such subjects as Cowper dealt with, and not become inevitably, to a certain extent, satirical. The

* "Mansfield Park," Chap. xix., third paragraph from end: — "I think we are a great deal better employed, sitting comfortably here among ourselves, and doing nothing."

† Read rather "free-working."

Digitized by Google

ludicrous is in some sort the imagination of common life. The "dreary intercourse" of which Wordsworth makes mention* would be dreary unless some people possessed more than he did the faculty of making fun. A universe in which Dignity No. 1 conversed decorously with Dignity No. 2 on topics befitting their state would be perhaps a levee of great intellects and a tea-table of enormous thoughts; but it would want the best charm of this earth, — the medley of great things and little, of things mundane and things celestial, things low and things awful, of things eternal and things of half a minute. It is in this contrast that humor and satire have their place, pointing out the intense, unspeakable incongruity of the groups and juxtapositions of our world. To all of these which fell under his own eye, Cowper was alive. A gentle sense of propriety and consistency in daily things was evidently characteristic of him: and if he fail of the highest success in this species of art, it is not from an imperfect treatment of the scenes and conceptions which he touched, but from the fact that the follies with which he deals are not the greatest follies; that there are deeper absurdities in human life than "John Gilpin" touches upon; that the superficial occurrences of ludicrous life do not exhaust, or even deeply test, the mirthful resources of our minds and fortunes.

As a scold, we think Cowper failed. He had a great idea of the use of railing, and there are many pages of laudable invective against various vices which we feel no call whatever to defend. But a great vituperator had need to be a great hater; and of any real rage, any such gall and bitterness as great and irritable satirists have in other ages let loose upon men, — of any thorough, brooding, burning, abiding detestation, — he was as incapable as a tame hare. His vituperation reads like the mild man's whose wife ate up his dinner: "Really, sir,

* "Tintern Abbey."

Digitized by Google

I feel quite *angry!*" Nor has his language any of the sharp intrusive acumen which divides in sunder both soul and spirit, and makes fierce and unforgetable reviling.

Some people may be surprised, notwithstanding our lengthy explanation, at hearing Cowper treated as of the school of Pope. It has been customary, at least with some critics,* to speak of him as one of those who recoiled from the artificiality of that great writer, and at least commenced a return to a simple delineation of outward nature; and of course there is considerable truth in this idea. The poetry (if such it is) of Pope would be just as true if all the trees were yellow and all the grass flesh-color: he did not care for "snowy scalps" or "rolling streams" or "icy halls" or "precipices' gloom"; nor, for that matter, did Cowper either. He, as Hazlitt most justly said, was as much afraid of a shower of rain as any man that ever lived.† At the same time, the fashionable life described by Pope has no reference whatever to the beauties of the material universe, never regards them, could go on just as well in the soft, sloppy, gelatinous existence which Dr. Whewell (who knows) says is alone possible in Jupiter and Saturn; but the rural life of Cowper's poetry has a constant and necessary reference to the country, is identified with its features, cannot be separated from it even in fancy. Green fields and a slow river seem all the material of beauty Cowper had given him; but what was more to the purpose, his attention was well concentrated upon them. As he himself said, he did not go more than thirteen miles from home for twenty years, and very seldom as far. He was therefore well able to find out all that was charming in Olney and its neighborhood; and as it presented nothing which is not to be found in any of the fresh rural parts of England, what he has left us is really

* Macaulay, for example, — Essay on Byron. — Ed.

† Lectures on the English Poets, — Thomson and Cowper.

Digitized by Google

a delicate description and appreciative delineation of the simple essential English country.

However, it is to be remarked that the description of nature in Cowper differs altogether from the peculiar delineation of the same subject which has been so influential in more recent times, and which bears, after its greatest master, the name "Wordsworthian." To Cowper nature is simply a background, — a beautiful background, no doubt, but still essentially a *locus in quo*, a space in which the work and mirth of life pass and are performed. A more professedly formal delineation does not occur than the following: —

"O Winter! ruler of the inverted year,
Thy scattered hair with sleet-like ashes filled,
Thy breath congealed upon thy lips, thy cheeks
Fringed with a beard made white with other snows
Than those of age, thy forehead wrapped in clouds,
A leafless branch thy sceptre, and thy throne
A sliding car, indebted to no wheels,
But urged by storms along its slippery way,—
I love thee, all unlovely as thou seem'st,
And dreaded as thou art. Thou hold'st the sun
A prisoner in the yet undawning east,
Shortening his journey between morn and noon,
And hurrying him, impatient of his stay,
Down to the rosy west; but kindly still
Compensating his loss with added hours
Of social converse and instructive ease,
And gathering, at short notice, in one group
The family dispersed, and fixing thought,
Not less dispersed by daylight and its cares.
I crown thee king of intimate delights,
Fireside enjoyments, home-born happiness,
And all the comforts that the lowly roof
Of undisturbed retirement and the hours
Of long uninterrupted evening know.
No rattling wheels stop short before these gates."*

After a very few lines he returns within doors to the occupation of man and woman, to human tasks

* "The Task."

Digitized by Google

and human pastimes. To Wordsworth, on the contrary, nature is a religion. So far from being unwilling to treat her as a special object of study, he hardly thought any other equal or comparable. He was so far from holding the doctrine that the earth was made for men to live in, that it would rather seem as if he thought men were created to see the earth. The whole aspect of nature was to him a special revelation of an immanent and abiding power, a breath of the pervading art, a smile of the Eternal Mind, according to the lines which every one knows:—

> "A sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean, and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
> A motion and a spirit that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things." †

Of this haunting, supernatural, mystical view of nature Cowper never heard. Like the strong old lady who said "*she* was born before nerves were invented," he may be said to have lived before the awakening of the detective sensibility which reveals this deep and obscure doctrine.

In another point of view, also, Cowper is curiously contrasted with Wordsworth as a delineator of nature. The delineation of Cowper is a simple delineation: he makes a sketch of the object before him, and there he leaves it. Wordsworth, on the contrary, is not satisfied unless he describe not only the bare outward object which others see, but likewise the reflected high-wrought feelings which that object excites in a brooding, self-conscious mind. His subject was not so much nature, as nature reflected by Wordsworth. Years of deep musing and long introspection had made him familiar with every shade

† Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey."

Digitized by Google

and shadow in the many-colored impression which the universe makes on meditative genius and observant sensibility. Now, these feelings Cowper did not describe, because to all appearance he did not perceive them. He had a great pleasure in watching the common changes and common aspects of outward things, but he was not invincibly prone to brood and pore over their reflex effects upon his own mind: —

> "A primrose by the river's brim
> A yellow primrose was to him,
> And it was nothing more."*

According to the account which Cowper at first gave of his literary occupations, his entire design was to communicate the religious views to which he was then a convert: he fancied that the vehicle of verse might bring many to listen to truths which they would be disinclined to have stated to them in simple prose. And however tedious the recurrence of these theological tenets may be to the common reader, it is certain that a considerable portion of Cowper's peculiar popularity may be traced to their expression; he is the one poet of a class which has no poets. In that once large and still considerable portion of the English world which regards the exercise of the fancy and the imagination as dangerous, — snares, as they speak, distracting the soul from an intense consideration of abstract doctrine, — Cowper's strenuous inculcation of those doctrines has obtained for him a certain toleration. Of course all verse is perilous: the use of single words is harmless, but the employment of two in such a manner as to form a rhyme, the regularities of interval and studied recurrence of the same sound, evince an attention to time and a partiality to things of sense. Most poets must be prohibited; the exercise of the fancy requires watching: but Cowper is a ticket-of-leave man; he has the chaplain's certificate; he has expressed himself

* Wordsworth, "Peter Bell."

Digitized by Google

"with the utmost propriety"; the other imaginative criminals must be left to the fates, but he may be admitted to the sacred drawing-room, though with constant care and scrupulous surveillance. Perhaps, however, taken in connection with his diseased and peculiar melancholy, these tenets really add to the artistic effect of Cowper's writings. The free discussion of daily matters, the delicate delineation of domestic detail, the passing narrative of fugitive occurrences, would seem light and transitory if it were not broken by the interruption of a terrible earnestness, and relieved by the dark background of a deep and foreboding sadness. It is scarcely artistic to describe "the painted veil which those who live call life,"* and leave wholly out of view and undescribed "the chasm sightless and drear"† which lies always beneath and around it.

It is of "The Task" more than of Cowper's earlier volume of poems that a critic of his poetry must more peculiarly be understood to speak. All the best qualities of his genius are there concentrated, and the alloy is less than elsewhere. He was fond of citing the saying of Dryden that the rhyme had often helped him to a thought, — a great but very perilous truth. The difficulty is, that the rhyme so frequently helps to the wrong thought; that the stress of the mind is recalled from the main thread of the poem, from the narrative or sentiment or delineation, to some wayside remark or fancy which the casual resemblance of final sound suggests. This is fatal, unless either a poet's imagination be so hot and determined as to bear down upon its objects and to be unwilling to hear the voice of any charmer who might distract it; or else the nature of the poem itself should be of so desultory a character that it does not much matter about the sequence of the thought, at least within great and ample limits, — as in some of Swift's casual rhymes, where the sound

*Shelley, Sonnet, 1813. †Ibid.

Digitized by Google

is in fact the connecting link of unity. Now, Cowper is not often in either of these positions: he always has a thread of argument on which he is hanging his illustrations, and yet he has not the exclusive interest or the undeviating energetic downrightness of mind which would insure his going through it without idling or turning aside; consequently the thoughts which the rhyme suggests are constantly breaking in upon the main matter, destroying the emphatic unity which is essential to rhythmical delineation. His blank verse of course is exempt from this defect; and there is moreover something in the nature of the metre which fits it for the expression of studious and quiet reflection. "The Task," too, was composed at the healthiest period of Cowper's later life, in the full vigor of his faculties, and with the spur [that] the semi-recognition of his first volume had made it a common subject of literary discussion whether he was a poet or not. Many men could endure — as indeed all but about ten do actually in every generation endure — to be without this distinction; but few could have an idea that it was a frequent point of argument whether they were duly entitled to possess it or not, without at least a strong desire to settle the question by some work of decisive excellence. This "The Task" achieved for Cowper. Since its publication his name has been a household word, a particularly household word, in English literature. The story of its composition is connected with one of the most curious incidents in Cowper's later life, and has given occasion to a good deal of writing.

In the summer of 1781 it happened that two ladies called at a shop exactly opposite the house at Olney where Cowper and Mrs. Unwin resided. One of these was a familiar and perhaps tame object, — a Mrs. Jones, the wife of a neighboring parson; the other, however, was so striking that Cowper, one of the shyest and least demonstrative of men, immediately

Digitized by Google

asked Mrs. Unwin to invite her to tea. This was a great event, as it would appear that few or no social interruptions, casual or contemplated, then varied what Cowper called the "duality of his existence." This favored individual was Lady Austen, a person of what Mr. Hayley terms "colloquial talents"; in truth, an energetic, vivacious, amusing, and rather handsome lady of the world. She had been much in France, and is said to have caught the facility of manner and love of easy society which is the unchanging characteristic of that land of change. She was a fascinating person in the great world, and it is not difficult to imagine she must have been an excitement indeed at Olney. She was, however, most gracious; fell in love, as Cowper says, not only with him but with Mrs. Unwin; was called "Sister Ann," laughed and made laugh, was every way so great an acquisition that his seeing her appeared to him to show "strong marks of providential interposition." He thought her superior to the curate's wife, who was a "valuable person," but had a family, etc., etc. The new acquaintance had much to contribute to the Olney conversation. She had seen much of the world, and probably seen it well, and had at least a good deal to narrate concerning it. Among other interesting matters, she one day recounted to Cowper the story of John Gilpin as one which she had heard in childhood; and in a short time the poet sent her the ballad, which every one has liked ever since. It was written, he says (no doubt truly), in order to relieve a fit of terrible and uncommon despondency; but altogether, for a few months after the introduction of this new companion, he was more happy and animated than at any other time after his first illness. Clouds, nevertheless, began to show themselves soon. The circumstances are of the minute and female kind which it would require a good deal of writing to describe, even if we knew them perfectly. The original cause of misconstruction was a rather

Digitized by Google

romantic letter of Lady Austen, drawing a sublime picture of what she expected from Cowper's friendship. Mr. Scott, the clergyman at Olney, who had taken the place of Mr. Newton, and who is described as a dry and sensible man, gave a short account of what he thought was the real embroilment: "Who," said he, "can be surprised that two women should be continually in the society of one man and quarrel sooner or later with *each other?*" Cowper's own description shows how likely this was.*

"From a scene of the most uninterrupted retirement," he says to Mr. Unwin, "we have passed at once into a state of constant engagement. Not that our society is much multiplied: the addition of an individual has made all this difference. Lady Austen and we pass our days alternately at each other's *château.* In the morning I walk with one or other of the ladies, and in the afternoon wind thread. Thus did Hercules, and thus probably did Samson, and thus do I; and were both those heroes living, I should not fear to challenge them to a trial of skill in that business, or doubt to beat them both. As to killing lions and other amusements of that kind, with which they were so delighted, I should be their humble servant and beg to be excused."†

Things were in this state when she suggested to him the composition of a new poem of some length in blank verse, and on being asked to suggest a subject, said, "Well, write upon that sofa;" whence is the title of the first book of "The Task." According to Cowper's own account, it was this poem which was the cause of the ensuing dissension.

"On her first settlement in our neighborhood, I made it my own particular business (for at that time I was not employed in writing, having published my first volume and not begun my second) to pay my devoirs to her Ladyship every morning at eleven. Customs very soon become laws. I began 'The Task'; for she was the lady who gave me 'The Sofa' for a subject. Being once engaged in the work, I began to feel the inconvenience of my morning attendance. We had seldom breakfasted ourselves till ten, and the intervening hour was all the time that I could find in the whole

*Southey, Chap. x. †Ibid.

Digitized by Google

day for writing; and occasionally it would happen that the half of that hour was all that I could secure for the purpose. But there was no remedy. Long usage had made that which at first was optional, a point of good manners, and consequently of necessity; and I was forced to neglect 'The Task,' to attend upon the Muse who had inspired the subject. But she had ill health, and before I had quite finished the work was obliged to repair to Bristol." *

And it is possible that this is the true account of the matter; yet we fancy there is a kind of awkwardness and constraint in the manner in which it is spoken of. Of course the plain and literal portion of mankind have set it down at once that Cowper was in love with Lady Austen, just as they married him over and over again to Mrs. Unwin; but of a strong passionate love, as we have before explained, we do not think Cowper capable, and there are certainly no signs of it in this case. There is, however, one odd circumstance: years after, when no longer capable of original composition, he was fond of hearing all his poems read to him except "John Gilpin"; there were recollections, he said, connected with those verses which were too painful. Did he mean the worm that dieth not,—the reminiscence of the animated narratress of that not intrinsically melancholy legend?

The literary success of Cowper opened to him a far larger circle of acquaintance, and connected him in close bonds with many of his relations, who had looked with an unfavorable eye at the peculiar tenets which he had adopted, and the peculiar and recluse life which he had been advised to lead. It is to these friends and acquaintance that we owe that copious correspondence on which so much of Cowper's fame at present rests. The complete letter-writer is now an unknown animal. In the last century, when communications were difficult and epistles rare, there were a great many valuable people who devoted a good deal of time to writing elaborate letters. You

* Southey, Chap. x

Digitized by Google

wrote letters to a man whom you knew nineteen years and a half ago, and told him what you had for dinner, and what your second cousin said, and how the crops got on. Every detail of life was described and dwelt on, and improved. The art of writing, at least of writing easily, was comparatively rare; which kept the number of such compositions within narrow limits. Sir Walter Scott says he knew a man who remembered that the London post-bag once came to Edinburgh with only one letter in it. One can fancy the solemn conscientious elaborateness with which a person would write, with the notion that his letter would have a whole coach and a whole bag to itself, and travel two hundred miles alone, the exclusive object of a red guard's care. The only thing like it now — the deferential minuteness with which one public office writes to another, conscious that the letter will travel on her Majesty's service three doors down the passage — sinks by comparison into cursory brevity: no administrative reform will be able to bring even the official mind of these days into the grave inch-an-hour conscientiousness with which a confidential correspondent of a century ago related the growth of apples, the manufacture of jams, the appearance of flirtations, and other such things. All the ordinary incidents of an easy life were made the most of; a party was epistolary capital, a race a mine of wealth. So deeply sentimental was this intercourse, that it was much argued whether the affections were created for the sake of the ink, or ink for the sake of the affections. Thus it continued for many years; and the fruits thereof are written in the volumes of family papers which daily appear, are praised as "materials for the historian," and consigned, as the case may be, to posterity or oblivion. All this has now passed away: Sir Rowland Hill is entitled to the credit not only of introducing stamps, but also of destroying letters. The amount of annotations which will be required to make the

Digitized by Google

notes of this day intelligible to posterity is a wonderful idea, and no quantity of comment will make them readable: you might as well publish a collection of telegraphs. The careful detail, the studious minuteness, the circumstantial statement of a former time is exchanged for a curt brevity or only half-intelligible narration. In old times, letters were written for people who knew nothing and required to be told everything; now they are written for people who know everything except the one thing which the letter is designed to explain to them. It is impossible in some respects not to regret the old practice: it is well that each age should write for itself a faithful account of its habitual existence. We do this to a certain extent in novels, but novels are difficult materials for a historian: they raise a cause and a controversy as to how far they are really faithful delineations; Lord Macaulay is even now under criticism for his use of the plays of the seventeenth century. Letters are generally true on certain points: the least veracious man will tell truly the color of his coat, the hour of his dinner, the materials of his shoes; the unconscious delineation of a recurring and familiar life is beyond the reach of a fraudulent fancy. Horace Walpole was not a very scrupulous narrator, yet it was too much trouble even for him to tell liés on many things; his set stories and conspicuous scandals are no doubt often unfounded, but there is a gentle undercurrent of daily unremarkable life and manners which he evidently assumed as a datum for his historical imagination. Whence posterity will derive this for the times of Queen Victoria it is difficult to fancy. Even memoirs are no resource: they generally leave out the common life, and try at least to bring out the uncommon events.

It is evident that this species of composition exactly harmonized with the temperament and genius of Cowper: detail was his *forte* and quietness his element. Accordingly, his delicate humor plays

Digitized by Google

over perhaps a million letters, mostly descriptive of events which no one else would have thought worth narrating, and yet which when narrated show to us, and will show to persons to whom it will be yet more strange, the familiar, placid, easy, ruminating, provincial existence of our great-grandfathers. Slow, Olney might be; indescribable it certainly was not, — we seem to have lived there ourselves.

The most copious subject of Cowper's correspondence is his translation of Homer. This was published by subscription; and it is pleasant to observe the healthy facility with which one of the shyest men in the world set himself to extract guineas from every one he had ever heard of. In several cases he was very successful. The University of Oxford, he tells us, declined, as of course it would, to recognize the principle of subscribing towards literary publications; but other public bodies and many private persons were more generous. It is to be wished that their aid had contributed to the production of a more pleasing work. The fact is, Cowper was not like Agamemnon. The most conspicuous feature in the Greek heroes is a certain brisk, decisive activity, which always strikes and always likes to strike. This quality is faithfully represented in the poet himself: Homer is the briskest of men. The Germans have denied that there was any such person; but they have never questioned his extreme activity. "From what you tell me, sir," said an American, "I should like to have read Homer: I should say he was a go-ahead party." Now, this is exactly what Cowper was not: his genius was domestic and tranquil and calm. He had no sympathy, or little sympathy, even with the common half-asleep activities of a refined society: an evening party was too much for him, a day's hunt a preposterous excitement. It is absurd to expect a man like this to sympathize with the stern stimulants of a barbaric age, — with a race who fought because they liked it, and a

Digitized by Google

poet who sang of fighting because he thought their taste judicious. As if to make matters worse, Cowper selected a metre in which it would be scarcely possible for any one, however gifted, to translate Homer. The two kinds of metrical composition most essentially opposed to one another are ballad poetry and blank verse. The very nature of the former requires a marked pause and striking rhythm: every line should have a distinct end and a clear beginning; it is like martial music,—there should be a tramp in the very versification of it.

"Armor rusting in his halls
On the blood of Clifford calls:
'Quell the Scot,' exclaims the lance;
'Bear me to the heart of France,'
Is the longing of the shield;
Tell thy name, thou trembling field;
Field of death, where'er thou be,
Groan thou with our victory!"*

And this is the tone of Homer. The grandest of human tongues marches forward with its proudest steps; the clearest tones call "Forward!" the most marked of metres carries him on.

"Like a reappearing star,
Like a glory from afar,"†

he ever heads, and will head, "the flock of war."‡ Now, blank verse is the exact opposite of all this. Dr. Johnson laid down that it was verse only to the eye, which was a bold dictum; but without going this length, it will be safe to say that of all considerable metres in our language it has the least distinct conclusion, [the] least decisive repetition, the least trumpet-like rhythm: and it is this of which Cowper made choice. He had an idea that extreme literalness was an unequaled advantage, and logically reasoned that it was easier to do this in that metre than in any other. He did not quite hold, with Mr.

*†‡ Wordsworth, "Feast of Brougham Castle."

Digitized by Google

Cobbett, that the "gewgaw fetters of rhyme were invented by the monks to enslave the people";* but as a man who had due experience of both, he was aware that it is easier to write two lines of different endings than two lines of the same ending, and supposed that by taking advantage of this to preserve the exact grammatical meaning of his author, he was indisputably approximating to a good translation.

"Whether," he writes, "a translation of Homer may be best executed in blank verse or in rhyme is a question in the decision of which no man finds difficulty who has ever duly considered what translation ought to be, or who is in any degree practically acquainted with those kinds of versification. . . . No human ingenuity can be equal to the task of closing every couplet with sounds homotonous, expressing at the same time the full sense and only the full sense of the original."

And if the true object of translation were to save the labor and dictionaries of construing schoolboys, there is no question but this slavish adherence to the original would be the most likely to gain the approbation of those diminutive but sure judges; but if the object is to convey an idea of the general tone, scope, and artistic effect of the original, the mechanical copying of the details is as likely to end in a good result as a careful cast from a dead man's features to produce a living and speaking being. On the whole, therefore, the condemnation remains, that Homer is not dull and Cowper is.

With the translation of Homer terminated all the brightest period of Cowper's life. There is little else to say. He undertook an edition of Milton: a most difficult task, involving the greatest and most accurate learning in theology, in classics, in Italian,—in a word, in all ante-Miltonic literature. By far the greater portion of this lay quite out of Cowper's path. He had never been a hard student, and his evident incapacity for the task troubled and vexed him: a man who had never been able to assume any

* Beginning of imaginary letter in "Rejected Addresses."

Digitized by Google

real responsibility was not likely to feel comfortable under the weight of a task which very few men would be able to accomplish. Mrs. Unwin, too, fell into a state of helplessness and despondency; and instead of relying on her for cheerfulness and management, he was obliged to manage for her and cheer her. His mind was unequal to the task. Gradually the dark cloud of melancholy, which had hung about him so long, grew and grew, and extended itself day by day. In vain Lord Thurlow, who was a likely man to know, assured him that his spiritual despondency was without ground; he smiled sadly, but seemed to think that at any rate he was not going into Chancery. In vain Hayley, a rival poet, but a good-natured, blundering, well-intentioned, incoherent man, went to and fro, getting the Lord Chief Justice and other dignitaries to attest, under their hands, that they concurred in Thurlow's opinion. In vain, with far wiser kindness, his relatives, especially many of his mother's family, from whom he had been long divided, but who gradually drew nearer to him as they were wanted, endeavored to divert his mind to healthful labor and tranquil society. The day of these things had passed away; the summer was ended. He became quite unequal to original composition, and his greatest pleasure was hearing his own writings read to him. After a long period of hopeless despondency, he died on April 25 in the first year of this century; and if he needs an epitaph, let us say that not in vain was he Nature's favorite. As a higher poet sings:—

"And all day long I number yet,
All seasons through, another debt,
Which I, wherever thou art met,
To thee am owing;
An instinct call it, a blind sense,
A happy, genial influence,
Coming one knows not how nor whence,
Nor whither going.
. . . . . .

Digitized by Google

"If stately passions in me burn,
And one chance look to thee should turn,
I drink out of a humbler urn
A lowlier pleasure:
The homely sympathy that heeds
The common life our nature breeds;
A wisdom fitted to the needs
Of hearts at leisure." *

* Wordsworth, "To the Daisy."

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

APPENDIX.

TRANSLATIONS FROM BÉRANGER.

[The translations of "Laideur et Beauté," "La Mouche," "Cinquante Ans." and "Le Vieux Vagabond," were made for this work, by Walter Learned; those of "Roger Bontemps" and "Les Souvenirs du Peuple" are from William Young's volume, by permission of D. Appleton & Co.]

VERSES FROM "LES BOHÉMIENS" (THE GIPSIES).

To see is to have. Let's hurry anew!
Life on the wing
Is a rapturous thing.
To see is to have. Let's hurry anew!
For to see the world is to conquer it too.

. . . . . .

So naught do we own, from pride left free,
From statutes vain,
From heavy chain;
So naught do we own, from pride left free,—
Cradle nor house nor coffin have we.

But credit our jollity none the less,
Noble or priest, or
Servant or master;
But credit our jollity none the less,—
Liberty always means happiness.

Yes, credit our jollity none the less,
Noble or priest, or
Servant or master;
Yes, credit our jollity none the less,—
Liberty always means happiness.

Digitized by Google

Ugliness and Beauty.

(*Laideur et Beauté.*)

I am quite overcome by her beauty,
  Maybe I'm deceived by a mask.
Make her plain and repellent as duty;
  Let her be even ugly, I ask.
While so charming, ah, who could but love her?
  O powers of heaven and hell!
O spirits below and above her!
  Make her plain; let me love her as well.

Then appeared at my words of complaining
  Satan, father of darkness and night.
"Make her plain," said he: "this you'll be gaining, —
  That your rivals will flee at her sight.
I am fond of these metamorphoses;
  Lo, singing approaches the belle.
Fall pearls, fade bloom, wither roses —
  See! she's plain, and you love her as well."

"Me, plain!" she cried. "Sure 'tis an error."
  Saying which, to her glass she drew near,
First in doubt and then all in terror
  To fall, fainting with sorrow and fear.
"Swear for me and me only to live, dear,"
  Cried I, at her feet as I fell:
"Here's the one faithful heart I can give, dear, —
  Plainer still, I would love you as well."

Then her eyes grew so heavy with weeping
  That her grief touched my heart for a while:
"Give her back all the charms you are keeping!"
  And Satan said "Yes," with a smile.
As the first faint blush of the morning
  Her beauty returned like a spell,
New graces her fairness adorning,
  Sweeter still, and I loved her as well.

Then quickly her mirror regaining,
  She found not a charm out of place,
As, half to herself complaining,
  She wiped off the tears from her face.

Digitized by Google

Satan fled, and the fair one, my booty,
Left me, with these words like a knell:
"The girl whom God makes a beauty
Cannot love one who loves her so well."

THE GAD-FLY.

(*La Mouche.*)

In the midst of our laughter and singing,
'Mid the clink of our glasses so gay,
What gad-fly is over us winging,
That returns when we drive him away?
'Tis some god. Yes, I have a suspicion
Of our happiness jealous, he's come:
Let us drive him away to perdition,
That he bore us no more with his hum.

Transformed to a gad-fly unseemly,
I am certain that we must have here
Old Reason, the grumbler, extremely
Annoyed by our joy and our cheer.
He tells us in tones of monition
Of the clouds and the tempests to come:
Let us drive him away to perdition,
That he bore us no more with his hum.

It is Reason who comes to me, quaffing,
And says, "It is time to retire:
At your age one stops drinking and laughing,
Stops loving, nor sings with such fire;"—
An alarm that sounds ever its mission
When the sweetest of flames overcome:
Let us drive him away to perdition,
That he bore us no more with his hum.

It is Reason! Look out there for Lizzie!
His dart is a menace alway.
He has touched her, she swoons—she is dizzy:
Come, Cupid, and drive him away.
Pursue him; compel his submission,
Until under your strokes he succumb.
Let us drive him away to perdition,
That he bore us no more with his hum.

Digitized by Google

Hurrah, Victory! See, he is drowning
In the wine that Lizzetta has poured.
Come, the head of Joy let us be crowning,
That again he may reign at our board.
He was threatened just now with dismission,
And a fly made us all rather glum:
But we've sent him away to perdition;
He will bore us no more with his hum.

Fifty Years.

(*Cinquante Ans.*)

Wherefore these flowers? floral applause?
Ah, no, these blossoms came to say
That I am growing old, because
I number fifty years to-day.
O rapid, ever-fleeting day!
O moments lost, I know not how!
O wrinkled cheek and hair grown gray!
Alas, for I am fifty now!

Sad age, when we pursue no more—
Fruit dies upon the withering tree:
Hark! some one rapped upon my door.
Nay, open not. 'Tis not for me,—
Or else the doctor calls. Not yet
Must I expect his studious bow.
Once I'd have called, "Come in, Lizzette"—
Alas, for I am fifty now!

In age what aches and pains abound:
The torturing gout racks us awhile;
Blindness, a prison dark, profound;
Or deafness that provokes a smile.
Then Reason's lamp grows faint and dim
With flickering ray. Children, allow
Old Age the honor due to him—
Alas, for I am fifty now!

Ah, heaven! the voice of Death I know,
Who rubs his hands in joyous mood;
The sexton knocks and I must go,—
Farewell, my friends the human brood!

Digitized by Google

Below are famine, plague, and strife;
  Above, new heavens my soul endow:
Since God remains, begin, new life!
  Alas, for I am fifty now!

But no, 'tis you, sweetheart, whose youth,
  Tempting my soul with dainty ways,
Shall hide from it the somber truth,
  This incubus of evil days.
Springtime is yours, and flowers; come then,
  Scatter your roses on my brow,
And let me dream of youth again—
  Alas, for I am fifty now!

ROGER BONTEMPS.

To show our hypochondriacs,
  In days the most forlorn,
A pattern set before their eyes,
  Roger Bontemps was born.
To live obscurely, at his will,
  To keep aloof from strife—
Hurrah for fat Roger Bontemps!
  This is his rule of life.

To sport, when holidays occur,
  The hat his father wore,
With roses or with ivy leaves
  To trim it as of yore;
To wear a coarse old cloak, his friend
  For twenty years—no less—
Hurrah for fat Roger Bontemps!
  This is his style of dress.

To own a table in his hut,
  A crazy bed beside it,
A pack of cards, a flute, a can
  For wine—if Heaven provide it;
A beauty stuck against the wall,
  A coffer, naught to hold—
Hurrah for fat Roger Bontemps!
  Thus are his riches told.

Digitized by Google

To teach the children of the town
Their little games to play;
To make of smutty tales and jokes
New versions every day;
To talk of naught but balls, and take
From scraps of song his tone —
Hurrah for fat Roger Bontemps!
Thus is his learning shown.

To smack his lips at common wine,
The choicest not possessing;
To scorn your high-bred dames, and find
His Marguerite a blessing;
To give to tenderness and joy
Each moment as it flies —
Hurrah for fat Roger Bontemps!
'Tis thus he shows he's wise.

To say to Heaven, "I firmly trust
Thy goodness in my need;
Father, forgive, if mine has been
Perchance too gay a creed;
Grant that my latest season may
Still like the spring be fair" —
Hurrah for fat Roger Bontemps!
Such is his humble prayer.

Ye envious poor, ye rich who deem
Wealth still your thoughts deserving;
Ye who in search of pleasant tracks
Yet find your car is swerving;
Ye who the titles that ye boast
May lose by some disaster —
Hurrah for fat Roger Bontemps!
Go, take him for your master.

Jolly Jack.

[Thackeray's paraphrase of the same poem.]

When fierce political debate
Throughout the isle was storming,
And Rads attacked the throne and state,
And Tories the reforming,

Digitized by Google

To calm the furious rage of each,
And right the land demented,
Heaven sent us Jolly Jack, to teach
The way to be contented.

Jack's bed was straw, — 'twas warm and soft;
His chair a three-legged stool;
His broken jug was emptied oft,
Yet somehow always full.
His mistress's portrait decked the wall,
His mirror had a crack;
Yet, gay and glad, though this was all
His wealth, lived Jolly Jack.

To give advice to avarice,
Teach pride its mean condition,
And preach good sense to dull pretense,
Was honest Jack's high mission.
Our simple statesman found his rule
Of moral in the flagon,
And held his philosophic school
Beneath the "George and Dragon."

When village Solons cursed the Lords,
And called the malt-tax sinful,
Jack heeded not their angry words,
But smiled and drank his skinful.
And when men wasted health and life,
In search of rank and riches,
Jack marked aloof the paltry strife,
And wore his threadbare breeches.

"I enter not the church," he said,
"But I'll not seek to rob it;"
So worthy Jack Joe Miller read,
While others studied Cobbett.
His talk it was of feast and fun;
His guide the Almanack:
From youth to age thus gayly run
The life of Jolly Jack.

And when Jack prayed, as oft he would,
He humbly thanked his Maker;
"I am," said he, "O Father good!
Nor Catholic nor Quaker.

Digitized by Google

Give each his creed, let each proclaim
His catalogue of curses:
I trust in thee, and not in them,
In thee and in thy mercies!

"Forgive me if, 'midst all thy works,
No hint I see of damning;
And think there's faith among the Turks,
And hope for e'en the Brahmin.
Harmless my mind is, and my mirth,
And kindly is my laughter;
I cannot see the smiling earth
And think there's hell hereafter."

Jack died; he left no legacy
Save that his story teaches, —
Content to peevish poverty,
Humility to riches.
Ye scornful great, ye envious small,
Come follow in his track;
We all were happier, if we all
Would copy Jolly Jack.

The People's Memories.

(*Les Souvenirs du Peuple.*)

Ay, many a day the straw-thatched cot
Shall echo with his glory!
The humblest shed, these fifty years,
Shall know no other story.
There shall the idle villagers
To some old dame resort,
And beg her with those good old tales
To make their evenings short.
"What though they say he did us harm?
Our love this cannot dim:
Come, Granny, talk of him to us;
Come, Granny, talk of him."

"Well, children — with a train of kings
Once he passed by this spot;
'Twas long ago; I had but just
Begun to boil the pot.

Digitized by Google

On foot he climbed the hill, whereon
I watched him on his way;
He wore a small three-cornered hat,
His overcoat was gray.
I was half frightened till he said,
'Good-day, my dear!' to me."
"O Granny, Granny, did he speak?
What, Granny! you and he?"

"Next year, as I, poor soul, by chance,
Through Paris strolled one day,
I saw him taking, with his court,
To Notre Dame his way.
The crowd were charmed with such a show;
Their hearts were filled with pride:
'What splendid weather for the fête!
Heaven favors him!' they cried.
Softly he smiled, for God had given
To his fond arms a boy."
"Oh, how much joy you must have felt!
O Granny, how much joy!"

"But when at length our poor Champagne
By foes was overrun,
He seemed alone to hold his ground;
Nor dangers would he shun.
One night, as might be now, I heard
A knock — the door unbarred —
And saw — good God! — 'twas he, himself,
With but a scanty guard.
'Oh, what a war is this!' he cried,
Taking this very chair."
"What! Granny, Granny, there he sat?
What! Granny, he sat there?"

"'I'm hungry,' said he: quick I served
Thin wine and hard brown bread;
He dried his clothes, and by the fire
In sleep drooped down his head.
Waking, he saw my tears — 'Cheer up,
Good dame!' says he: 'I go
'Neath Paris's walls to strike for France
One last avenging blow.'

Digitized by Google

He went; but on the cup he used,
Such value did I set,
It has been treasured." "What! till now?
You have it, Granny, yet?"

"Here 'tis; but 'twas the hero's fate
To ruin to be led;
He whom a pope had crowned, alas!
In a lone isle lies dead.
'Twas long denied: 'No, no,' said they,
'Soon shall he reappear;
O'er ocean comes he, and the foe
Shall find his master here.'
Ah, what a bitter pang I felt,
When forced to own 'twas true!"
"Poor Granny! Heaven for this will look —
Will kindly look on you."

THE OLD TRAMP.

(*Le Vieux Vagabond.*)

Here in this gutter let me die;
I finish old, infirm, and tired.
"He's drunk," will say the passers-by;
'Tis well, — their pity's not desired.
I see some turn their heads away,
While others toss to me their sous.
"On to your junket! run," I say:
Old tramp, in death I need no help from you.

Yes, here I'm dying of old age —
Of hunger people never die.
I hoped some almshouse might assuage
My suffering when the end was nigh;
But filled is every retreat,
So many people are forlorn.
My nurse, alas! has been the street:
Old tramp, here let me die where I was born.

In youth, it used to be my prayer
To craftsmen, "Let me learn your trade:"
"Clear out — we have no work to spare;
Go beg," was the reply they made.

Digitized by Google

You rich, who bade me work, I've fed
With relish on the bones you threw;
Made of your straw an easy bed:
Old tramp, and now I have no curse for you.

I might, poor wretch, have robbed with ease;
But no, better to beg instead.
At most I've stripped the wayside trees
Of apples ripening overhead.
Yet twenty times have I been thrown
In prison, — 'tis the King's decree;
Robbed of the one sole thing I own:
Old tramp, at least the sun belongs to me.

The poor — is any country his?
What are to me your grain, your wine,
Your glory and your industries,
Your orators? They are not mine.
And when a foreign foe waxed fat
Within your undefended walls,
I shed my tears, poor fool, at that:
Old tramp, — his hand was open to my calls.

Why, like an insect made to kill,
Did you not crush me when you could?
Or, better yet, have taught me skill
To labor for the common good?
Into an ant the grub may turn
If sheltered from the bitter blast;
And so might I for friendship yearn:
Old tramp, — I die your enemy at last.

EXTRACT FROM PREFACE, PAGES 168–9.

I have treated it [the Revolution] as a power which might have whims one should be in a position to resist. All or nearly all my friends have taken office. I have still one or two who are hanging from the greased pole;* I am pleased to believe that they are caught by the coat-tails, in spite of their efforts to come down. I might therefore have had a share in the distribution of offices. Unluckily I have no love for sinecures, and all compulsory labor

* "On the fence," in American idiom.

Digitized by Google

has grown intolerable to me, except perhaps that of a copying clerk. Slanderers have pretended that I acted from virtue. Pshaw! I acted from laziness. That defect has served me in place of merits; wherefore I recommend it to many of our honest men. It exposes one, however, to curious reproaches. It is to that placid indolence that severe critics have laid the distance I have kept myself from those of my honorable friends who have attained power. Giving too much honor to what they choose to call my fine intellect, and forgetting too much how far it is from simple good sense to the science of great affairs, these critics maintain that my counsels might have enlightened more than one minister. If one believes them, I, crouching behind our statesmen's velvet chairs, would have conjured down the winds, dispelled the storms, and enabled France to swim in an ocean of delights. We should all have had liberty to sell, or rather to give away, but we are still rather ignorant of the price. Ah! my two or three friends who take a song-writer for a magician, have you never heard, then, that power is a bell which prevents those who set it ringing from hearing anything else? Doubtless ministers sometimes consult those who are at hand: consultation is a means of talking about one's self which is rarely neglected. But it will not be enough even to consult in good faith those who will advise in the same way. One must still act: that is the duty of the position. The purest intentions, the most enlightened patriotism, do not always confer it. Who has not seen high officials leave a counselor with brave intentions, and an instant after return to him, from I know not what fascination, with a perplexity that gave the lie to the wisest resolutions? "Oh!" they say, "we will not be caught there again! what drudgery!" The more shamefaced add, "I'd like to see you in my place!" When a minister says that, be sure he has no longer a head. There is indeed one of them, but only one, who, without having lost his head, has often used this phrase with the utmost sincerity; he has therefore never used it to a friend.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google